A TYPOLOGY OF RELIGIOUS INFLUENCE ON GUSTAV MAHLER’S
“RESURRECTION” SYMPHONY

A Thesis in
Musicology
by
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Mahler’s spirituality, an integral facet of his compositional output, expanded far beyond the boundaries of traditional religious belief systems. His personalized worldview evolved from endless study of diverse religious and philosophical texts, an endeavor justified only by his insatiable desire for truth in a world where it evaded him. Various components of this synthetic worldview are realized and expressed in Mahler’s prolific symphonic output, the earliest and most spiritually charged of which is the “Resurrection” Symphony completed in 1894. Mahler’s eschatological statement of this symphony is profound and revolutionary: life after death without final judgment. This thesis examines the various religious and spiritual influences that contributed to form Mahler’s idiosyncratic vision of the afterlife in his “Resurrection” Symphony.

The three belief systems assessed by chapter are Reform Judaism, Christianity, and the mystical writings of Gustav Theodor Fechner (1801-1887). Of the first two, Reform Judaism has been nearly neglected in Mahler scholarship while Christianity is often superficially imposed without careful consideration. Chapter 1 aims to investigate this overlooked role of Reform Judaism in both Mahler’s early life and therefore his music, while Chapter 2 seeks to remove dogmatic Christian beliefs that have become tethered to the composer and his Second Symphony. Ultimately, Mahler rejects both of these religions for they failed to ease his persistent metaphysical agony. Chapter 3 explores the ideas of Fechner as one philosophical anecdote to this spiritual void, beliefs which are realized in the climactic statement of the “Resurrection” Symphony.
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Introduction

An unfaltering belief in a life after death battled the relentless fear of existential unknowns in Mahler’s life, a continuous doubt Bruno Walter described as “questions about God, the sense and aim of our existence, and the reasons for the unspeakable suffering in the whole of creation.”¹ This conviction did not originate from the practice of an organized religion, but from an earnest need to understand a dimension of existence that eluded him. Throughout his life Mahler searched through a diverse range of philosophical and religious texts and belief systems, all of which contributed to his spiritual development. One might call him a comparative religionist.² Ultimately this personal endeavor provided Mahler with a vision of life after death, or rather a set of visions, which found different modes of expression in his compositional oeuvre. The Second, Fourth, Eighth and Ninth Symphonies, along with Das Lied von der Erde, each strive to capture Mahler’s belief in a life after death. While all of these compositions contemplate spiritual and philosophical conflict, no other work professes this eschatological statement as does the “Resurrection” Symphony.

Notwithstanding the profundity of this symphony, the complex spiritual dimension is commonly addressed only in broad overviews contained within general analyses of the work. In publications on the work by Paul Bekker, Constantin Floros, Henry-Louis de La Grange, Donald Mitchell and Edward R. Reilly, explication of Mahler’s spiritual views is subordinate to examinations of form, thematic language, and style.³ Other scholars, such as Peter Franklin and

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Stephen E. Hefling, have studied the symphony in more detail, but without addressing the diverse spiritual background of the piece with the depth it deserves. In the end, these analyses of the Second Symphony fail to account for the diverse spiritual and religious components that formed Mahler’s personal vision of life after death. This thesis seeks to address this lacuna with a critical typology of religious influence in Mahler’s “Resurrection” Symphony.

To achieve this goal, the thesis will be divided into three chapters based on religious tradition. In Mahler’s biography, the first, yet often overlooked, religious tradition that should be addressed is Judaism. Chapter 1 aims to evaluate the role of Reform Judaism in both Mahler’s early life, but also in his Second Symphony. In scholarship, description of Mahler’s Jewishness has assumed an almost exclusively ethnic and cultural perspective, omitting strong relationships to Jewish dogma. An assessment of this facet of Mahler’s biography reveals that not only did religious Judaism play a continuous role in the composer’s childhood, but that this influence had its effect in the midst of the revolutionary movement of Reform Judaism. Although Mahler did not practice Judaism as an adult, the influence of this progressive religious environment on Mahler as a child is evident.

Following in chronological order of major spiritual events in the life of Mahler, the second chapter addresses the Christian elements of the Second Symphony, including a consideration of the implications of his conversion to Catholicism in 1897. Although this event took place three years after the completion of the Second Symphony, a clear understanding of what it reveals is crucial when exploring Christian features of the symphony. The first half of


this chapter defends the claim that refuge from antisemitic prejudice functioned as Mahler’s primary motivation for his conversion, rather than an authentic conviction about religious dogma.

In the second half, a distinction is made between dogma and aesthetics. Christian art and its various forms resonated deeply with Mahler, specifically in how they represented the Weltgeist (Almighty Spirit) in which Mahler believed. Although Mahler incorporates several elements of Christianity as artistic components of the Second Symphony, these serve to express a personal vision of resurrection rather than any specifically Christian belief. As with Mahler’s relationship with Judaism, Christianity failed to ease his metaphysical agony. In the Second Symphony, Mahler envisions a resurrection in which all of humanity is redeemed, a concept fundamentally at odds with both Judaism and Christianity.

Of the many philosophical and religious texts Mahler studied, the eschatology of philosopher Gustav Theodor Fechner addressed most effectively the spiritual void left by Mahler’s rejection of Judaism and Christianity. The final chapter reveals how Fechner and the revolutionary ideas of his book The Little Book of Life After Death (1836) likely impressed upon Mahler a vision of an afterlife that is irreconcilable with traditional religion: life after death without final judgment.

Regarding Mahler’s reception of Fechner, a diverse but uneven collection of academic research has been published. The most extensive of these works, the dissertation of Jeremy Barham, provides important background on Fechner’s animistic view of the natural world in relationship to Mahler, but it falls short of addressing Fechner’s nuanced and idiosyncratic views.

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5 La Grange, Gustav Mahler, vol. 1, 414.
concerning the afterlife, which actually had a considerable impact on the composer. Likewise, Catherine Keller provides a Fechnerian interpretation of Mahler’s Third Symphony but omits any substantial discussion of central works by Fechner, such as *The Little Book of Life After Death*, a text that deals extensively with the afterlife. Mahler’s friend and erstwhile intellectual mentor Siegfried Lipiner, a student of Fechner, introduced the composer to these texts, but the manner in which they may have shaped his music has not been formally examined. The strong correlations that exist between *The Little Book of Life After Death* and Mahler’s own program and conceptualization of the Second Symphony will be investigated in the final chapter.

Each chapter seeks to identify elements from the Second Symphony specific to the creed or philosophy in question. This extraction and examination places Mahler’s spirituality under a microscope, allowing for careful focus on each contributing religious tradition. Fechner emerges as the crucial figure: his role supersedes Judaism and Christianity; Mahler found truth in this contemporary metaphysics where ancient religions had failed him. With this new grasp of the context of Mahler’s complex spiritual identity, misunderstandings of the Second’s ostensibly grandiose can be corrected.

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Chapter 1

Rethinking Mahler’s Spirituality: Reform Judaism as a Formative Factor

Introduction

For Mahler, a man obsessed with religious and eschatological questions, a contextual study of Reform Judaism exposes a new level of depth in his profound spiritual statements. Mahler’s Judaism has been the source of scholarly controversy since the emergence of the first biographies. Kurt Blaukopf claims, “There is no evidence that religious customs were strictly observed in the Mahler home,” whereas Henry-Louis de La Grange suggests that Mahler was “brought up in an Orthodox Jewish family.” This and other conflicting accounts of Mahler’s Jewish background, compounded by his conversion to Catholicism in 1897, make for a complex narrative of the composer’s religious evolution in the context of Jewishness. As a result, family members, colleagues, and researchers have used the term “Jewish” frequently, but all with varying definitions.

When discussing employment in the Viennese musical establishment, Mahler told Bruno Walter that Judaism was both a race and a religion, and “unfortunately, it is the race that matters.” This ethnic interpretation common in fin-de-siècle Europe is frequently encountered in criticism of his music, usually referring to either melodies or the music as a whole. Max Brod, in an article on Mahler’s “Jewish melodies,” discusses the use of Hassidic folk songs which sprang from the “unconscious source of his Jewish soul.” Similarly, Theodor Adorno—no

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10 Ibid., 411.
antisemite—detected secular Jewish melodies in the Fourth Symphony.\textsuperscript{13} Others have identified broader Jewish attributes in Mahler’s music. For Heinrich Berl, the third movement of Mahler’s First Symphony is “the purest Jewry” due to the “march, funeral, irony, folk song, canon, melodic development, harmony, instrumentation,” all of which he believes to be thoroughly Jewish.\textsuperscript{14} Talia Pecker Berio also describes Mahler’s Jewish identity with a broad brush: “a Jewish composer born a Jew is a Jewish composer regardless of whether his music is Jewish or not.”\textsuperscript{15}

This scholarly emphasis on Jewish culture has preempted careful examination of Jewish spirituality, and in particular it has failed to consider Reform Judaism as a developmental factor. If one can argue that Mahler’s Jewish background was influential enough to manifest itself in his melodies, then one is obligated to consider whether spiritual concepts found their way into his personal worldview as well. The impressions formed during childhood are especially worth consideration; to quote Mahler: “In artistic creation, almost none but those impressions received between the ages of four and eleven become decisive and ultimately fruitful.”\textsuperscript{16} For scholars and performers alike, this spiritual assessment can provide new information about the depth of expression and cosmic understanding Mahler devoted his life to achieving. Additionally, it can suggest possible explanations for the biographical discrepancies one encounters so frequently in the surviving evidence of Mahler’s Jewish identity.

This chapter will examine the essential role Reform Judaism played in both Mahler’s childhood and the artistic worldview that would guide many of his symphonic works. In the first

half, existing scholarship and primary sources regarding Mahler’s Jewish background will be reframed through the contextual lens of the Reform Movement. The second half will investigate the influence of Reform Judaism ideas on Mahler’s worldview in his Resurrection Symphony.

1.1 A History of Reform Judaism

While an extensive history of Reform Judaism is beyond the scope of this chapter, a brief survey is necessary in order to establish its role in Mahler’s life. Reform Judaism had its origin in the Enlightenment, as many European Jews reassessed the nature of their religion at the dawn of societal integration.17 On September 27, 1791, the National Assembly of France declared political emancipation of Jews, thus granting Jews equal citizenship to that of their Christian counterparts.18

This legislation then spread throughout Europe during Napoleon’s conquest, including parts of western Germany where Moses Mendelssohn, Israel Jacobson, and David Friedländer would lay the foundation of Reform Judaism at the turn of the century.19 Napoleon appointed his younger brother, Jerome Bonaparte, to oversee the German kingdom of Westphalia on July 7, 1807.20 Within one year of his rule, Jerome had decreed freedom of religious practice and specific emancipation for Westphalian Jews.21 Legislative rights continued to be implemented in individual states and towns throughout Germany. Following Otto von Bismarck’s unification of

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21 Ibid.
the German States, the North German Federation granted citizenship independent of religious affiliation in 1869.22

It goes without saying that although the Enlightenment ultimately benefited European Jews, it did not banish antisemitism. In fact, many enlightened figures, such as Voltaire and Christian Wilhelm von Dohm, employed strong antisemitic constructs in their proclamation of Enlightenment ideals.23 At the same time, the Marquis d’Argens, a contemporary of Voltaire, extolled Jews as the epitome of Enlightenment ideals.24

A major Jewish figure of the Enlightenment was Moses Mendelssohn, grandfather of early Romantic composers Felix and Fanny Mendelssohn.25 In 1780, Mendelssohn translated the Torah into German, and thereby ignited the Reform movement.26 (A translation by R. Jekuthiel Blitz in 1679 preceded Mendelssohn’s, but the latter deemed Blitz “ignorant of Hebrew” and unable to “penetrate into the depth of the Hebrew style.”)27 Mendelssohn’s translation obviated the need for knowledge of Hebrew to study sacred texts, but it also sparked severe opposition from Orthodox Jews, who feared it would dismantle European Jewish identity.28 As a result, Orthodox leaders swiftly placed a ban on Mendelssohn’s translation.29 Moreover, although Mendelssohn’s translation initiated the Reform Movement, he himself would struggle to accept many reforms professed by his followers.30

24 Ibid., 111.
29 Ibid.
Several of Mendelssohn’s successors, such as Israel Jacobson and David Friedländer, furthered the movement he initiated, particularly by incorporating it into the liturgy. Jacobson pioneered this application; his role as president of the Jewish council in Kassel, a city of Westphalia, provided him with the necessary leeway to implement his reform. Beginning with the Jewish school in Kassel, the student service now utilized the vernacular German language in cooperation with German hymns. A positive reaction to these reforms motivated Jacobson to construct the first official Reform temple, marking the beginning of a new era. He continued his work in Berlin, collaborating with Jacob Herz Beer by conducting Reform services out of their own homes. Here Jacobson encountered greater resistance from both the Orthodox community and the government, the latter seeing Reform Judaism and its surprising appeal as potentially absorbing Christian converts. Eventually, the government prohibited Jacobson from engaging in religious activities. Yet as in the case of Mendelssohn, Jacobson’s progress was taken up by a circle of preachers whom he influenced. New Reform Temples were established by Eduard Kley in Hamburg, Isaac Auerbach in Leipzig, and eventually the expansion reached throughout Austria, Hungary, France, Denmark and England.

In addition to Mendelssohn’s translation and civil emancipation, the establishment of progressive Jewish educational systems contributed to a social climate welcoming of Reform Judaism. David Friedländer founded the Jewish Free School as far back as 1778, where the study of Hebrew was now supplemented with secular topics and comprehension of the German

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31Mahler would later serve as the Music and Choral Director of the Kassel Theater from 1883-85. See La Grange, *Gustav Mahler*, vol. 1, 106.
33Ibid., 23.
35Cohon, “The Mission of Reform Judaism,” 34.
36Ibid.
language. Many schools followed Friedländer’s example; the Wilhelmschule in Breslau (1791), the Herzogliche Franzschule in Dessau (1799), the Jacobsonschule in Seesen (1801), and the Philanthropin in Frankfurt am Main (1804). These schools often operated in collaboration with the Reform Temples previously described. Armed with a broader education and exposure to Reform practices, a new generation of Reform Jews began to rise.

1.2 Reform Judaism: The Ideas

An exhortation by Moses Mendelssohn expresses what would become the core idea of the reform movement: “Adapt yourselves to the customs and the constitution of the land in which you live; yet, at the same time, adhere firmly to the religion of your ancestors.” For the Reformists, German cultural identity and the Jewish faith were not, and should not, be mutually exclusive. With the progress of European Jewish emancipation came the breakdown of insular Jewish communities. Reform Judaism sought to answer the question this societal change posed: “Could one continue to be a Jew and still enjoy the benefits of the great revolutions?”

Mendelssohn’s hope ultimately realized itself in a shift in the perceived authority of the Orthodox Jewish law. Orthodoxy reads this law as divine authority, whereas Reform Judaism subjects it to human judgment. This revision hoped to make the ancient traditions of Judaism more relevant to the current social environment and criticized the Orthodox system as being unnecessarily dogmatic. Therefore, emphasis was moved from laws developed for a previous

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43 Ibid.
time and place—and indeed, a relatively homogenous one—to the broader universal tenets concerning morality and the religion as a whole, which would play out in a pluralistic European society.⁴⁴

A second major reform concerns the return to Palestine: “Palestine is a precious memory of the past, but it is not a hope of the future.”⁴⁵ As Jewish emancipation progressed throughout Europe, the Reformists chose to call the land in which they were born their true home. The wish to adapt to their current situation is exemplified in this reform as well, which contrasts with the Orthodox belief that European Jews were living in temporary exile.⁴⁶

Closely related to this revised view of exile is the humanized vision of the Messiah. Traditional Orthodoxy believed that a personal Messiah would bring humanity to an age of universal peace.⁴⁷ In a drastic, even iconoclastic break, the Reformists considered the collective Jewish people as the new Messiah, shifting responsibility of the Messianic Age to humans.⁴⁸

Although frequently accused of being an assimilatory movement, if one defines assimilation as “the conscious preference of a non-Jewish way of life,” it is clear Jewish reformists could not be fairly characterized in this way.⁴⁹ In fact, the fight against apostasy functioned as a major stimulus for the movement. If the blame for Jews leaving the religion fell on anyone, the Reformists argued it should be the Orthodox community. As claimed by the Reformists, the legality of Orthodox Judaism turned emancipated Jews away and thereby unintentionally encouraged assimilation. They exemplified Mendelssohn’s children; unable to adhere to their father’s Orthodox standards, four of his six children ultimately converted to

⁴⁴ Philipson, The Reform Movement in Judaism, 3.
⁴⁵ Ibid., 5.
⁴⁷ Philipson, The Reform Movement in Judaism, 5.
⁴⁸ Ibid., 6.
Christianity. The following quote by Israel Jacobson speaks to the desired unification of national culture and Judaism:

Be it far from me that I should have any secret intention to undermine the pillars of your faith, to diminish our old and honored principles through the glitter of new opinions, or that, because of some hidden vanity, I should become a traitor to both our religion and you. You know the faithful adherence to the faith of my fathers.

Ideally, these “new opinions” would revive the Jewish community and counteract both assimilation and apostasy.

1.3 Reform Judaism in Mid Nineteenth-Century Moravia

Although born in Kalischt, a town located in Bohemia, Mahler spent his childhood in the Moravian town of Iglau, after his father moved the family there on October 22, 1860. The ever-evolving rift between Orthodox and Reform Judaism penetrated this country, a clash that can be viewed most easily through the politics of the Moravian Chief Rabbinate position.

The death of Chief Rabbi Nehemias Trebtisch, whose period of service was defined by continuous confrontations with progressive rabbis, left the position open in 1842 and available to candidates of polarized positions. Samson Raphael Hirsch, a defender of traditional Judaism who eventually won the position, promised to fight the “new Judaism” of his popular opponent, Hirsch Fassel. Although not elected, Fassel remained a vocal critic of Hirsch, calling his election a “great mistake.” The pushback from the progressive community ultimately broke

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51 Plaut, The Rise of Reform Judaism: A Sourcebook of its European Origins, 29; This quote comes from Jacobson’s speech at the opening of his temple in Seesan.

52 La Grange, Gustav Mahler, vol. 1, 9.


54 Ibid., 139-40.

55 Ibid., 172.
Hirsch, who returned to his home country of Germany in 1851 after what he described as “the most frustrating period of his rabbinical life.” This same progressive contingent argued for the dissolution of the chief rabbinate position, citing the stringent Orthodoxy of the past chiefs. As a compromise, the power of the position was reduced and a non-controversial Rabbi Abraham Placzk held the post. Placzk’s indifference ultimately allowed for growth of the Reform Jewish contingent: by the end of the nineteenth century, Orthodox Jews in Moravia were the minority.

1.4 Reform Judaism and Mahler’s Childhood

In 1863, the reputable Rabbi Adolf Jellinek spoke at the consecration ceremony of the Iglau Synagogue. The construction of this synagogue grew out of the local Cultusgemeinde, the Jewish community established in 1862 in which membership was compulsory for all local Jews. Ultimately, the Iglau Synagogue suffered the abhorrent fate of so many European synagogues in the twentieth century: on March 30, 1939, it was destroyed by invading Nazis.

Vladimír Karbusický asserts this consecration marked the establishment of a reformed synagogue, and although he does not elaborate on supporting details, this claim seems valid for a number of reasons. First, the synagogue’s Rabbi Jacob Joachim Unger possessed the typical pedigree of a liberal rabbi. Not only did he hold a doctorate in philology from the University of

56 Miller, Rabbis and Revolution: The Jews of Moravia in the Age of Emancipation, 172.
57 Ibid., 318.
58 Ibid.
60 Schorske, Gustav Mahler: Formation and Transformation, 7.
61 Miller, Rabbis and Revolution: The Jews of Moravia in the Age of Emancipation, 326.
Berlin, but he also promoted religious tolerance in like manner to the local Catholic priest. Second, Unger allowed, and most likely invited, Rabbi Adolf Jellinek to speak at the consecration ceremony.

Jellinek’s invitation is of great significance due to his stature as a prominent reformist rabbi in Vienna. His career, culminating in his appointment as rabbi of the Vienna Stadttempel in 1865, began with his studies at the University of Leipzig in 1840, where he first encountered the Reform Movement. Jellinek brought reformist innovations with him to Vienna, where he first worked at the Leopoldstadt Temple in 1858. Initially, these adaptations were controversial, such as the incorporation of organ music into the service, but eventually he had more success in his liberal position on conversion standards and circumcision. Rabbi Unger, who also spoke at the consecration ceremony of the Iglau Synagogue, surely wished to align himself with progressive views such as these by preaching in the company of Jellinek.

In addition to his duties as a rabbi, Unger instructed Mahler’s Mosaic Studies course, the only class in which Mahler received an “Excellent” marking. These studies certainly left an impression on the young composer, for when he studied for his conversion to Catholicism in 1897, Alma remembers how he presented difficult questions to the catechist with “the pride of an Old Testament adept.”

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67 Ibid., 110.
68 Ibid., 111-12.
71 La Grange, *Gustav Mahler*, vol. 1, 22.
72 Ibid., 414.
Furthermore, there is every reason to believe the Iglau Synagogue and Cultusgemeinde enveloped Mahler’s childhood. Natalie Bauer-Lechner recalls Mahler’s childhood memory of attending a service at the synagogue and interrupting the congregation’s singing by yelling, “Be quiet! Be quiet! It’s horrible,” after which he began singing one of his favorite songs, Eits a binkel Kasi (Hrasi).73 Many years later, in 1899, Mahler conducted Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony in Prague, where he had a memorable interaction with Magnus Dawison, cantor of a local synagogue and singer of the bass solo in the symphony.74 As Dawison recalls, he shared an afternoon with Mahler, conversing over coffee and singing Hebrew hymns for the composer:

I first sang him a composition by one of our synagogue authors. Mahler thought it had too little musical content. Then I asked if I might now improvise on the basis of words of prayer. He agreed. I quickly ran up and down the scale, and then began to sing. I sang with all my heart and soul, I put in all the Jewish Weltschmerz, but also all the meaning of the words. The master listened. And as I came to the end, the old Day of Reconciliation prayer: “Do not forsake us when our strength falters,” he whispered in a dry voice: “Yes, that is religious! That’s how I heard it as a child, sung by the old prayer-leader in the village synagogue.”75

Mahler was of course referring to the Iglau Synagogue. Not surprisingly, Mahler’s two explicit memories of the synagogue are tied to music, and their firm place in his memory suggests a frequent, if not regular, presence at the temple. Moreover, the anecdotes reveal Mahler’s sensitivity to Jewish prayer. Only when Dawison used words of Hebrew prayer did Mahler find the experience “religious.” Karbusický even claims Mahler received his bar mitzvah at the Iglau Synagogue, but the scholar does not offer any empirical evidence to support this remark.76

Indications of Mahler’s exposure to Reform Judaism can also be seen in what we know of his family, especially Mahler’s father, Bernhard Mahler. Modern scholars who look at

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73 La Grange, Gustav Mahler, vol. 1, 15.
Judaism from an Orthodox perspective tend to underestimate the seriousness of Bernhard’s faith. Hans Holländer identifies Bernhard as a freethinker who “shut the door upon every religious usage of traditional Hebraism,”77 a statement echoed by Dika Newlin, who suggests he was a “free thinker with no use for the traditions of Judaism.”78 Kurt Blaukopf continues to use the term “freethinker” as a description for Bernhard.79 These remarks are disputed by La Grange, who takes the opposite position, claiming Bernhard’s “religion meant much more to him than his son’s biographers have so far led us to believe.”80 Contemporary descriptions of him strike a middle ground between the modern accounts; a newspaper review of Mahler’s first public piano recital in 1870 describes him as a “nine-year old boy...the son of a local business man of the Jewish faith.”81

Identifying Bernhard as a “free thinker” implies he harbored an aversion towards the Jewish religion. Yet on December 12, 1878, Bernhard was elected by majority to the committee of the Iglau Cultusgemeinde and the School Committee.82 As mentioned above, registration with the Cultusgemeinde was mandatory, but Bernhard’s popular election to the committee indicates not only that he voluntarily participated in the Cultusgemeinde, but that he found acceptance in the Jewish community. Furthermore, a historical interpretation that considers the reformist nature of the Iglau Synagogue can account for the “free thinking” mind of a man who nonetheless embraced and was favored by Iglau’s Jews. The overstatements of Holländer, Newlin, and Blaukopf, all of whom failed to consider the reformist atmosphere, thus are belied by Bernhard’s role in the Cultusgemeinde when viewed in this context. Additionally, there is little doubt the

79 Blaukopf, Gustav Mahler, 17.
80 La Grange, Gustav Mahler, vol. 1, 21.
81 Blaukopf, Gustav Mahler, 23.
82 La Grange, Gustav Mahler, vol. 1, 841 n. 25.
Mahler family’s involvement with the *Cultusgemeinde* was authentic; Justine Mahler’s godfather was the cantor of the Iglau Synagogue and also a member of the *Cultusgemeinde*. 83

In light of these environmental details, Mahler’s exposure to the Jewish religion is undeniable. Yet these conditions were specific to the Reform Movement which had made its way to Moravia. These progressive, yet religiously based ideals provided Mahler with a spiritual foundation upon which he would build for most of his career as a symphonic composer. The first step toward musical spirituality did not take long, for in 1888, at the age of 28, Mahler would begin working on his first large-scale spiritual statement: the Second Symphony.

1.5 Reform Judaism and the Second Symphony

The remainder of this chapter will show that although a thoroughly Christocentric interpretation has been imposed on the Second Symphony, the core concepts are fundamentally Jewish. The themes of Judgment Day, the Apocalypse, reward and punishment, and resurrection all originated in the Jewish religion, and then were inherited by Christianity during its gradual separation from Judaism. It is through this symphony that the ideas which surrounded Mahler as a child first enter his musical output. Furthermore, the Second Symphony’s critical reception of these Jewish religious elements parallels the manner in which the Reform Movement adapted them to their own standards.

The Second Temple period of Jewish thought, lasting between 530 B.C.E. to 70 C.E., brought with it many developments in eschatological thinking, including resurrection. After the destruction of the Second Temple by the Romans in 70 C.E., rabbis focused on renewing their

83 La Grange, *Gustav Mahler*, vol. 1, 841 n. 25.
interpretations of the Torah in order to better understand their transforming environment.\textsuperscript{84} With resurrection came Yom ha-Din (Day of Judgment), a day on which God would not only punish the enemies of Israel, but also pass judgment on each individual Jew.\textsuperscript{85} Resurrection would precede Yom ha-Din so that the dead could be judged uniformly with the living.\textsuperscript{86} In this form of resurrection, the dead are not revived in order to be saved, but rather return to existence so that their ultimate fate might be sealed. Mahler closely simulates this event: “the graves spring open, and all creation comes writhing out of the bowels of the earth, with wailing and gnashing of teeth. Now they all come marching along in a mighty procession. . .for none is just in the sight of God.”\textsuperscript{87} This quote from Mahler’s explanation of the finale to Natalie Bauer-Lechner describes the deceased of the world being resurrected and marching to their judgment. Additionally, Mahler’s lamentation, “none [are] just in the sight of God,” recalls the traditional Jewish belief that death is punishment for sin; “there is no death without sin.”\textsuperscript{88}

Redemptive resurrection, the form of resurrection which all ultimately experience at the conclusion of the Second Symphony, also exists in Jewish thought. By the fourth century B.C.E., bodily resurrection, in which the soul is reunited with the physical body, became a tenet of Rabbinic Judaism.\textsuperscript{89} The Book of Daniel (12:2), in which Daniel envisions the Apocalypse,

\textsuperscript{85} Werblowsky and Wigoder, \textit{The Oxford Dictionary of the Jewish Religion}, 233, 750.
\textsuperscript{86} Ibid., 750.
speaks of resurrection for the righteous. It reads, “Many of those that sleep in the dust of the earth will awake, some to eternal life, others to reproaches, to everlasting abhorrence.”

The Books of Ezekiel (37:1-8) and Isaiah (26:19) also describe redemptive resurrection in a way recalled in the Second Symphony. Ezekiel envisions himself in a valley of dry bones, and is commanded by God to prophesy the resurrection of the surrounding dead. The verse continues, “I prophesied as He commanded me. The breath entered them, and they came to life and stood up on their feet, a vast multitude.” This scene depicts a collective resurrection, much like the redeemed egalitarian humanity Mahler describes in his programs of the Second Symphony.

Similarly, Isaiah exclaims, “Oh, let your dead revive! Let corpses arise! Awake and shout for joy, You who dwell in the dust!” A traditional interpretation of these passages, however, would claim this resurrection only applies to righteous Jews. It is this point which Mahler challenges through the resurrection of all people in his Second Symphony.

Daniel 12:2 speaks to the presence of reward and punishment in the afterlife, a concept which also emerged throughout the Second Temple period. The Garden of Eden became known as paradise, or the abode of the righteous after death. Its counterpart, Geihinnom, is the place where the “wicked” are punished. But unlike the Christian conception of hell, in which eternal suffering is sentenced, Geihinnom exists for transitional and temporary purification. This crucial detail is of great importance to Mahler’s spiritual views. Many of his works, including the
Second Symphony, the Fourth Symphony, the Eighth Symphony, and Das Lied von der Erde, find eternal damnation unthinkable.

A need for hope in eschatological reward came from the period following the destruction of the Second Temple. Hope was needed for Jews who lived good lives yet still suffered in this life; these writings promised they would be rewarded for their suffering.  

Mahler craved this hope as well, from his earliest days; when asked as a child what he wanted to be when he grew up, Mahler responded, “a martyr.” This childhood sentiment receives mature reflection and ultimate expression in the text of the Second Symphony: “O Believe/ Thou wert not born in vain!/ Hast not lived in vain/ suffered in vain!”

While the presence of these Jewish concepts in the “Resurrection” Symphony may be a manifestation of Mahler’s childhood exposure to Judaism, the unique way he interacts with these ideas is reminiscent of Reform Judaism thinking. For the Reformists, redemptive resurrection involved the immortality of one’s soul, rather than a reunification of body and spirit. Life after death existed, but not in a physical manifestation. Mahler’s conclusive description of the Second Symphony emphasizes this ethereal and transcendent imagery: “There appears the glory of God! A wonderful light permeates us to our very heart - all is quiet and blissful! - There is no punishment and no reward! An almighty feeling of love illumines us with blessed knowledge and being!”

His description of the post-resurrection period as the essence of “love” and “being” highlights a soulful presence over a physical one.

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100 La Grange, Gustav Mahler, vol. 1, 1.
Furthermore, Mahler’s rejection of the Garden of Eden and Geihinnom, his “no punishment and no reward,” echoes the Reformist reaction to these constructs. Instead of eschatological destinations for reward and punishment, the Reformists suggested a more abstract continuation of the immortal soul. Likewise, Reformists introduced the idea of naturalistic immortality, a concept which believes in the continuing influence of a person after he or she has died. Both these ideas are central to Mahler’s thinking and to his Second Symphony in particular.

The most compelling role of Reform Judaism in the Second Symphony is surely through Mahler’s vision of a humanistic Messiah. The Reform Movement returned the responsibility and power of the individual Messiah of the Orthodox tradition to humanity as a collective. In this construction of the Messiah, there is no divine individual being which will bring humanity to a golden age; rather this will be achieved by the people of the world alone. Such is Mahler’s vision of the resurrection. Both the programs and the text of the “Resurrection” Symphony give no indication of an individual savior redeeming humanity, yet all the people of the world are resurrected and spared eternal judgment. It is through themselves that the golden age depicted at the close of the symphony is reached. Mahler leaves the music to envision this Messianic age of peace through the postlude, beginning after the conclusive statement of the finale verse: “What you have conquered/ Will bear you to God.”

It is here that the symphony rests in E-flat Major, with bells and dual harps laying a celestial foundation for recurring statements of what Floros labels the Eternity motif. The

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105 Ibid.
108 Floros, Gustav Mahler: The Symphonies, 70, 78.
instrumentation of this theme is of great importance to Mahler’s Messianic vision. Karbusický has deduced that Mahler’s experiences as a child included hearing the *shofar* at the Iglau Synagogue.\(^{109}\) His research has shown that the *shofar*, an instrument made out of a ram’s horn, was common in the synagogues of Bohemia and Moravia.\(^{110}\) Although he suggests its influence in the Second Symphony through the trumpets that sound the apocalypse (mvt. 5, m. 342), he omits any commentary on the postlude.

The postlude of the finale begins with the proclamation of the Eternity motif by the horns in m. 732, followed by the trumpets in m. 736. In Jewish tradition, the *shofar* is sounded for ceremonial occasions, such as the beginning of a jubilee year or the commencement of a new king.\(^{111}\) Naturally, some rabbis associate the coming of the Messiah with a sounding *shofar*.\(^ {112}\) In keeping with this Jewish tradition, Mahler employs the instruments that most closely resemble the timbre of the shofar to conclude his profound spiritual statement.

Not only is the instrumentation comparable to the *shofar*, but the melodic nature of the Eternity motif relates to the intervallic capabilities of the *shofar*. The interval of a fifth, distinctive of the *shofar*, begins this motif. Once the motif has been sounded for the final time, rhythmically augmented through mm. 744-751, only the descending fifth is sounded in m. 752, expanding to the octave in m. 756. It is through this that Mahler employs a traditional Jewish symbol of proclamation to announce the arrival of his own Messianic vision.

\(^{110}\) Ibid.
Conclusion

The influence of not only Judaism, but the progressive beliefs of the Reform movement, have clear manifestations in both Mahler’s overall worldview and his Second Symphony. Unfortunately, most research which explores Mahler’s Jewishness has maintained an ethnic and cultural focus, overlooking the religious role which the Reform movement played in Mahler’s life. A movement seeking to aid European Jews in their ever evolving environment, Reform Judaism had blossomed in Mahler’s home. Examining biographical details through this lens explains points that seem to be contradictory, specifically the scholarly understanding of Mahler’s father.

Within a spiritual statement as revolutionary as Mahler’s Second Symphony, it is not surprising to consider his upbringing in a Reform Synagogue. Both the presence and interaction of Jewish concepts in the symphony support this claim. Orthodox concepts, such as Judgment Day, the Apocalypse, reward and punishment, and resurrection are employed by Mahler in his attempt to express a personalized belief system. In an action that echoes the Reform movement’s adaptation of the Jewish religion, Mahler evolves the Reform conceptualization of Judaism into a profession of his individualistic worldview.
Chapter 2

The Role of Christianity in Mahler’s Aesthetics

Introduction

As Chapter One has suggested, the Second Symphony contains more Jewish concepts than scholars have hitherto acknowledged. Yet the presence of Christian elements, although subsidiary to the Jewish concepts, cannot be denied. While the surname “Resurrection” Symphony has obvious resonance with the core Christian belief of the resurrection of Jesus Christ, Mahler’s use of Christian elements does not incorporate this definitive concept. In fact, the Symphony’s programs and text never mention Jesus Christ, who is central in the Christian religion. On the contrary, it is Mahler’s less dogma-focused use of Christianity in his aesthetics that defines his individual spiritual worldview.

The absence, and ultimate rejection, of Christian dogma in the Second Symphony would find an apparent repudiation in Mahler’s conversion to Catholicism on February 23, 1897.113 His appointment as conductor of the Vienna Court Opera swiftly followed this decision.114 Before exploring the Christian element of the Second Symphony, an assessment of this significant decision must take place. A greatly debated biographical event, the understanding of Mahler’s baptism shapes the philosophical interpretations of Mahler’s compositions. As a result, the following question continues to resurface: was this conversion an action of spiritual development or a pragmatic defense against political antisemitism?

The first part of this chapter will suggest an answer to this question by reviewing the following elements: Mahler’s own statements and actions regarding his conversion; antisemitism in fin-de-siècle Vienna; and conversion in Vienna as a social phenomenon. The importance of

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114 Ibid., 416.
answering this question lies in the necessity of understanding the Christian elements of Mahler’s Second Symphony. Although Mahler’s conversion took place three years after the completion of the Second Symphony in 1894,\textsuperscript{115} the self-protective and perhaps careerist motivation of the act gives insight to the spiritual disposition of the composer in earlier years prior. If one accepted Mahler’s conversion as authentic, the Second Symphony would assume a meaning inconsistent with his later views. However, a careful analysis will reveal that although Mahler was a deeply spiritual being, his conversion was motivated purely by the resurgent antisemitic climate of Vienna.

Once the context of Mahler’s conversion has been established, the second part of Chapter 2 will analyze the nature of Christianity in the Second Symphony. Mahler’s use of traditional Christian symbols, such as the Lisztian Cross motif, the \textit{Dies irae} sequence, and the chorale, will be examined in the context of his musical profession of faith. Mahler did not write the Second as an expression of dogmatic Christian creed, but by incorporating Christian elements into his aesthetics, he created a spiritual foundation from which he could develop his personal spiritual beliefs.

\subsection*{2.1.1 The Conversion of Gustav Mahler}
Several of the people closest to Mahler described his fascination with Christianity as sincere. Mahler’s protégé, Bruno Walter, describes the conversion as a “formalization of his religious allegiance,” which simply “coincided with his appointment at the Vienna Opera House.”\textsuperscript{116} Similarly, Hans Holländer, author of early biographical articles, considers Mahler’s conversion

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the natural evolution of his spirituality. Mahler’s famous friend and composer, Richard Strauss, even said, “the Jew Mahler could still find elevation in Christianity.” And finally, Alma Mahler, the composer’s wife, described him as “a Christian-orientated Jew.”

Mahler’s conversion certainly seems sincere in this context, explaining why some contemporary colleagues and biographers defend the action as spiritual development. Yet these claims may also have been defenses against accusations of opportunism. Mahler’s explicit remarks concerning his baptism were infrequent and took place well after he assumed the Vienna Court Opera position. Moreover, when these remarks are read in the context of circumstances surrounding his possible appointment to the post he sought above all others, it seems more plausible that Mahler converted primarily to seek refuge from antisemitism.

2.1.2 Biographical Details

Although Mahler rarely spoke about his official religious identity, the few remarks he did make about his conversion are revealing. Mahler’s correspondence with Austrian music journalist Ludwig Karpath provides valuable insight. In one letter to Karpath, Mahler claims that he converted long before the Vienna Court Opera position opened, yet the official documents from the Kleine Michaeliskirche in Hamburg are dated from February of 1897. It was only three months later Mahler became conductor of the Vienna Court Opera. Yet Mahler ends this letter stating, “I do not hide the truth from you when I say that this action, which I took from an instinct of self-preservation and which I was fully disposed to take, cost me a great deal.”

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118 Charles Youmans, Mahler & Strauss: In Dialogue (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2016), 120.
119 Ibid., 185.
120 La Grange, Gustav Mahler, vol. 1, 411.
Mahler’s attempt to obscure the truth, in addition to his own description of his baptism as “self-preservation,” are extremely important. The former indicates that Mahler understood the implications of his actions in relation to the Vienna Court Opera position, which he aimed to present as coincidence. The latter appears to reveal that which he hoped to hide by claiming he had been baptized earlier—namely, the personal “cost” of adopting a religion on false pretenses. These statements strongly suggest a resistance to religious assimilation.

Karpath recalls a more honest conversation with Mahler well after the composer had become conductor at the Vienna Court Opera. When discussing potential conductors to assist Mahler in his position, Mahler’s fellow composer Engelbert Humperdinck suggested a man by the name of Leo Blech. Humperdinck informed Mahler that Blech also converted from Judaism, to which Mahler replied, “It won’t work, unfortunately, even if he has been baptized as you say. For the anti-Semites, I still count as a Jew despite my baptism, and more than one Jew is more than the Vienna Court Opera can bear.”122 This candid remark implies that Mahler’s attempt to abate the prejudice of antisemites was not successful while also confirming the continued presence of such hostility in Vienna.

Alma corroborates this statement in her memoirs, published much later in 1940; she writes, “The Jewish Question touched Mahler very closely. He had often suffered bitterly from it, particularly when Cosima Wagner, whom he greatly esteemed, tried to bar his appointment in Vienna because he was a Jew.”123 Cosima Wagner was wife to Richard Wagner, a composer not only famous for his progressive operas but also for his essay Das Judentum in der Musik [Jewry

in Music] written in 1850.\textsuperscript{124} This antisemitic polemic accused Jewish composers of creative deficiencies and musical theft.

An exchange reminiscent of the letter to Karpath took place with Hungarian composer Ödön von Mihalovich in a letter dated December 21, 1896.\textsuperscript{125} In regards to the Vienna position, Mahler wrote,

At the moment I am high on the list of candidates, but two factors are against me, it seems: my “madness,” which my enemies mention whenever they want to put difficulties in my path, and the fact that I was born a Jew; as regards in this point, I must tell you, in case you don’t know yet, that I was converted to Catholicism very shortly after I left Budapest.\textsuperscript{126}

Here Mahler attempts to alter his baptismal dates again. On March 22, 1891, Mahler left Budapest to accept a position with the Hamburg Opera,\textsuperscript{127} which suggests he intended to also convince Mihalovich that his conversion was unrelated to the Vienna Court Opera position. The fact that Mahler speaks about this false date in relation to the position in Vienna supports this interpretation. Additionally, when Mahler writes, “in case you don’t know yet,” he conveys an impression that this information is old news, and that it did take place a number of years earlier.

Mihalovich received another letter from Mahler on January 25, 1897, through which Mahler continued to describe the barriers he faced. He writes, “My informants tell me there would be no doubt at all about my appointment - if I were not a Jew. But this is what will probably settle it, and so Mottl . . . will win.”\textsuperscript{128} In this statement, Mahler refers to Felix Mottl,

\textsuperscript{125} Henry A. Lea, \textit{Gustav Mahler: Man on the Margin} (Bonn: Bouvier, 1985), 47.
\textsuperscript{126} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{127} La Grange, \textit{Gustav Mahler}, vol. 1, 226-27.
an Austrian conductor who competed with Mahler for the position. His statement implies that he had not yet converted, which contradicts his earlier letter to Mihalovich. Had the conversion already taken place, he would have certainly elaborated on the detail that he should not be discriminated against as a baptized Catholic. Furthermore, a sense of resignation surrounds his words. It seems as though Mahler believed he could not alter the situation. Perhaps this motivated Mahler to proceed with conversion the following month.

These communications with Karpath and Mihalovich suggest that had Mahler converted for spiritual reasons, he would not have found it necessary to give his colleagues false dates for his conversion. These discrepancies were seemingly an attempt on Mahler’s part to discredit suspicions of opportunism. A tangible sense of resistance and resignation to his religious assimilation pervades these statements as well, an emotion incongruent with someone willingly embracing a new religion. All things considered, these communications support the motivating role of antisemitism. From these statements a more plausible reading of Mahler’s experience begins to form, one that is consonant with the contemporary political climate of Vienna.

### 2.1.3 Antisemitism in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna

The year of 1897 marked Mahler’s arrival in Vienna, but it also signified an important year for the Christian Social movement of Vienna. Spearheaded by politician Karl Lueger and ideologue Karl von Vogelsang, this movement had been building momentum for nearly eight years. The official establishment of the Christian Social movement was preceded by the influence of Georg von Schönerer, whose German nationalism politicized antisemitism in Vienna. Elected to the

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Reichsrat in 1873, Schönerer’s utilization of antisemitism expanded throughout his career.\textsuperscript{131} By 1879, the former leftist openly exploited antisemitic rhetoric to push his nationalistic platform. In 1885, he called for the complete expulsion of Jews from Vienna.\textsuperscript{132}

While Schönerer’s extremism ultimately prevented his success, Lueger and Vogelsang channeled his momentum into the Christian Social movement. Formed in 1889, the movement utilized Austrian Catholicism as an effective ideology to promote an anti-liberal, antisemitic, and nationalistic agenda.\textsuperscript{133} This element of Catholicism united both the anti-liberals of Vienna and those who wished to remain loyal to the Habsburg Empire. The economic uncertainty, experienced most severely among the Austrian lower class and artisans, created fertile ground in which the Christian Social movement cultivated itself.\textsuperscript{134} The fall of the same Austrian liberalism which was blamed for the economic decline, combined with the country’s unapologetic ethnic pride added to this atmosphere of political opportunity.

The movement achieved a great victory in the year of 1897, when Lueger became mayor of Vienna despite Franz Joseph’s disapproval of his demagogic antisemitism.\textsuperscript{135} Lueger had won in the three preceding elections, but Franz Joseph refused to sanction his victory and only conceded in 1897.\textsuperscript{136} Lueger, also a former leftist, began his political career in 1885 when he won a position in the Reichsrat.\textsuperscript{137} This accomplishment marked the beginning of his descent into political antisemitism, for he would not have won without the support of the antisemitic Reform Union. He engaged the union discretely only to win their favor. It was not until 1887 that

\textsuperscript{131} Carl E. Schorske, \textit{Fin-de-siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture} (New York: Knopf, 1979), 125-27.
\textsuperscript{132} Levy, “Political Antisemitism in Germany and Austria,” 131; Schorske, \textit{Fin-de-siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture}, 127.
\textsuperscript{133} Schorske, \textit{Fin-de-siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture}, 140.
\textsuperscript{134} Levy, “Political Antisemitism in Germany and Austria,” 132.
\textsuperscript{135} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{136} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{137} Schorske, \textit{Fin-de-siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture}, 138.
Lueger openly embraced political antisemitism by supporting Schönerer’s bill proposing a restriction on Jewish immigration.\textsuperscript{138}

With the rise of the Christian Social movement came the validation of Vienna’s unique brand of antisemitism. When Lueger said, “I decide who is a Jew,” he expressed the fundamental element of this specific antisemitism: ambiguity.\textsuperscript{139} Lueger understood that an undefined belief could be used to his advantage, not only in uniting a range of people with varying antisemitic convictions, but also in denying accusations of antisemitism. The implications of this obscurity were far reaching and included discrepancies in treatment towards converts such as Mahler. The same contingent of people who functioned primarily with religious criteria felt conversion was acceptable, yet others embraced the racial prejudice of German Nationalism and concluded conversion was ineffective.\textsuperscript{140} The Arbeiter Reformverein of 1899 allowed converted Jews to vote, but not to run as candidates, thus propagating an idea of converts as more than second-class citizens, but still something less than first-class.\textsuperscript{141} The implication for Mahler was that if he wished to be considered for the Vienna Court Opera position, his conversion was essential yet guaranteed nothing.

The social ramifications of Christian Social popularity included more electoral victories of Josef Gregorig, Ernst Schneider, and Joseph Deckert.\textsuperscript{142} These figures openly advocated the annihilation of the Jewish community, condemned Alfred Dreyfus, and disseminated ritual murder libels—specifically, the local Polna Affair.\textsuperscript{143} Furthermore, violence was a common

\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{138} Schorske, \textit{Fin-de-siècle Vienna: Politics and Culture}, 138.
\item \textsuperscript{140} Ibid., 194, 198.
\item \textsuperscript{141} Ibid., 195.
\item \textsuperscript{142} Ibid., 196.
\item \textsuperscript{143} Ibid.
\end{itemize}
occurrence. While no mass murders took place, Jews were frequently attacked on the street. Less physical attacks took place in the form of business boycotts and social segregation.\textsuperscript{144} Jews were excluded from Burschenschaften (student fraternities) while children often attended different schools. In all these situations, the government failed to provide the Jewish community with necessary aid.\textsuperscript{145}

2.1.4 Conversion as a Phenomenon

This antisemitic climate accounts for the conversion of over 9,000 Jews to Catholicism between 1868 and 1903,\textsuperscript{146} primarily motivated by the attempt to eliminate career-inhibiting antisemitism.\textsuperscript{147} Conversion was essentially a prerequisite for integration into European society, thus opening significant opportunities.\textsuperscript{148} The conclusion, however, that career prospects were primary motivators is based on the examination of exclusively young, male converts.\textsuperscript{149} While this was most often the case for these men, as it was for Mahler, documents indicate that low-class, Jewish females also converted in order to marry non-Jewish partners of equal social status.\textsuperscript{150}

Cultural acceptance was the hope of many converts, yet its success varied. Although Mahler did become conductor of the Vienna Court Opera, he still faced regular and offensive antisemitic attacks.\textsuperscript{151} K.M. Knittel’s book, \textit{Seeing Mahler: Music and the Language of Antisemitism in the Fin-de-Siècle Vienna}, 46-47.
Antisemitism in Fin-de-Siècle Vienna, contains extensive research regarding antisemitic attacks from the press and colleagues throughout Mahler’s career.\textsuperscript{152} Converted Jews were often still considered essentially Jewish, a sentiment that increased with the evolving politicization and racialization of Judaism.\textsuperscript{153} As a result, re-conversions to Judaism were common once converted Jews found that antisemitic barriers continued to prevent their success despite their having become Christian.\textsuperscript{154}

Several figures in Mahler’s life also converted to Christianity from Judaism, among them Arnold Schoenberg, Victor Adler and Siegfried Lipiner.\textsuperscript{155} On March 21, 1898, Schoenberg, born to a Jewish family in Vienna, converted to Lutheranism.\textsuperscript{156} Although Vienna was a Catholic city, it is possible Schoenberg felt Protestantism to be of a lesser transition, as suggested by scholar Pamela White.\textsuperscript{157} Also a composer, it is likely Schoenberg wished to strengthen his attachments to Western cultural traditions and defend himself against resurgent antisemitism.\textsuperscript{158} And another parallel to Mahler exists: while Schoenberg’s belief system was influenced by ideologies other than Judaism, the antisemitic climate was the primary motivating factor in his decision.\textsuperscript{159} Schoenberg, however, returned to Judaism later in his life, recanting Lutheranism\textsuperscript{160} and proclaiming, “I am not a German, not a European, indeed perhaps scarcely even a human being (at least the Europeans prefer the worst of their race to me), but[…] I am a Jew[…] and] I

\textsuperscript{152} Knittel, Seeing Mahler: Music and the Language of Antisemitism in the Fin-de-Siècle Vienna, 46-47.
\textsuperscript{154} Pollak, “Cultural Innovation and Social Identity in fin-de-siècle Vienna,” 66.
\textsuperscript{155} Lea, Gustav Mahler: Man on the Margin, 50.
\textsuperscript{156} Dika Newlin, Bruckner, Mahler, Schoenberg (New York: W.W. Norton, 1978), 258.
\textsuperscript{158} Malcolm MacDonald, Schoenberg (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 93.
\textsuperscript{159} David Michael Schiller, Bloch, Schoenberg and Bernstein: Assimilating Jewish Music (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), 78.
\textsuperscript{160} Lea, Gustav Mahler: Man on the Margin, 50.
am content that it should be so.”161 Schoenberg returned to Judaism in 1933, the year of Hitler’s election as chancellor of Germany.162 This rising antisemitism motivated Schoenberg to move from Berlin to the United States in 1933.163

Adler also converted to Protestantism, considering it “the entry ticket to European culture,” and hoped to make life easier for his children.164 In his student days, Mahler had been a member of a Vegetarian Society where he met and befriended Adler.165 Adler, a physician and student of Freud, later founded the Austrian Social Democratic Workers’ Party.166 Mahler’s proximity to colleagues who chose to convert undoubtedly made the prospect more acceptable as a necessary step one must take in order to be successful.

In the context of this broader historical and biographical context, the unfortunate nature of Mahler’s conversion becomes difficult to deny. Had his fascination with Christianity not existed, and had comments indicating the possible sincerity of his conversion not been made, a study such as this one would be superfluous. As this is not the case, clarification is essential not only for historical accuracy but also for the analysis of the Second Symphony. The Christian elements of this symphony can be better understood with the knowledge that Mahler officially accepted Catholicism only due to the antisemitic climate of Vienna.

165 La Grange, Gustav Mahler, vol. 1, 68.
166 Ibid., 69.
2.2.1 Christian Aesthetics in the Second Symphony

If Mahler’s motivation for conversion was not religious, then how can Christian elements of Mahler’s Second Symphony be explained? Why would Mahler incorporate Christian elements if he did not truly accept the Catholic faith? The answer lies in the fine, yet crucial, distinction between dogma and aesthetics.

Edward E. Reilly describes the Christian element of the Second Symphony succinctly: “Mahler was drawing from Christian tradition and established musical symbolism. But it also seems clear that he has attempted to remove these sources from any narrow form of dogmatic Christianity, and ultimately from any form of doctrinal religion.” Indeed, it is Mahler’s fascination with the possibility of an aesthetics informed by Christianity that manifests itself in this symphony, rather than any representation of Christian beliefs. The following analysis will take Reilly’s statement one step further by examining how these Christian elements stop short of advocating explicitly Christian dogma, and how Mahler instead uses their spiritual potency to express his personal eschatological views.

Mahler’s attraction to the aesthetic elements of Catholicism has been well documented by Alma. In her memoirs, she makes the following reflection after criticizing Mahler’s use of a chorale to end the Fifth Symphony,

I was touching here on a rift in his being which often went so deep as to bring him into serious conflict with himself. He was attracted by Catholic mysticism, an attraction which was encouraged by those friends of his youth who changed their names and were baptized. His love of Catholic mysticism was, however, entirely his own.

Although the term “mysticism” possesses many connotations and varying definitions in religious contexts, Alma’s use of it in relation to the chorale clarifies the aesthetic implications the term

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had for her. In this remark Alma clarifies the distinction between aesthetic and dogma. The less orthodox term “mysticism” distinguishes Mahler from adherents of Christian dogma, highlighting his personalized relationship with religion.

Alma also observes that Mahler enjoyed visiting Catholic churches, particularly for their incense and Gregorian chant.\(^{169}\) With this in mind, it is not surprising that their wedding took place in the magnificent Karlskirche of Vienna, a venue that hardly seems appropriate for the intimate group of attendees.\(^{170}\) Alma’s recollection speaks to Mahler’s fascination with united forms of art and sensory stimulation in a place of spiritual worship. The artistic synthesis of architecture, visual art, sacred music, expressive literature, and ornamented vestments contribute to the Church’s ultimate objective of worship, while also constructing what one might describe as an aesthetic seduction.

The Catholic Church’s use of aesthetic synthesis for spiritual purposes intrigued other artists of fin-de-siècle Europe, most notably Wassily Kandinsky. His belief in the unification of various art forms for spiritual progress is described repeatedly in his writings:

> And thus one notices that each art has its own forces, which cannot be replaced by those of another art. And so, finally, one will arrive at a combination of the particular forces belonging to different arts. Out of this combination will arise in time a new art, an art we can foresee even today, a truly monumental art.
> And every artist who buries himself in the hidden inner treasures of his art is a man to be envied, a coworker upon the spiritual pyramid that will one day reach heaven.\(^{171}\)

For Kandinsky, the Catholic Church’s aesthetic synthesis functioned as a model for his own vision of “monumental art.”

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\(^{169}\) La Grange, *Gustav Mahler*, vol. 1, 414.


In a similar way, Mahler’s compositions unite a wide range of musical and philosophical elements in a profession of his own spiritual proclamations. Ultimately Mahler’s attraction to Christian aesthetic synthesis inspired him to create a personal artistic synthesis that communicated his own spirituality.

2.2.2 Todtenfeier

Within the Second Symphony, Mahler’s interest in Christianized art reveals itself in the first movement. Scholars have already established a convincing relationship between the first movement and the dramatic epic Dziady by Polish poet Adam Mickiewicz.\(^{172}\) Dziady, or Todtenfeier (as translated by Mahler’s close friend Siegfried Lipiner), blurs the lines between Christianity and paganism, incorporating elements of both to create a sense of mysterium. In his introduction to Part II of the poem, Mickiewicz describes the Forefathers’ Eve celebration of this part as follows:

> Our Forefathers’ Eve has this peculiarity, that it blends pagan ceremonies with ideas of the Christian religion, especially since All Souls Day occurs about the time of that festival. The common folk conceive that by the proffered food and drink and by their songs they offered relief to souls in purgatory. The solemn purpose of the festival, the solitary spot, the night hour, and the fantastic rites used to appeal strongly to my imagination. I often heard tales and songs of how the departed would return with requests or warnings.\(^{173}\)

Mickiewicz’s description conjures imagery of religious ceremonies loosely tied to Christianity. The artistic role of Christianity in this work closely aligns with Mahler’s intended relationship with Christianity. Content of this nature would surely be found irreverent by the dogmatic Christian. Mahler, however, found sufficient inspiration in this fantastical epic to incorporate it

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\(^{173}\) Franklin, “‘Funeral Rites’: Mahler and Mickiewicz,” 206-7.
into the beginning of his Second Symphony. The aforementioned scholars, specifically Stephen E. Hefling, have found extensive connections between the two works.\(^\text{174}\)

### 2.2.3 Liszt’s Cross Motif

On a musical level, Christian elements first emerge in the Second Symphony as early as m. 74 of the first movement, through Mahler’s presentation of the spiritually charged Lisztian Cross motif.\(^\text{175}\) Liszt scholar Paul Merrick suggests that “Liszt’s use of the Cross motif was more than just a musical symbol. It summarized his life and art. His achievement was to put into clear musical and dramatic terms a fully worked-out scheme of the drama of redemption.”\(^\text{176}\) Indeed, the religious Liszt incorporated the motif in many of his compositions beginning in the 1840s, some of which include *Psalm 116, Psalm 129, Psalm 137, Via Crucis. The 14 Stations of the Cross for Mixed Choir, Vocal Solos and Organ or Piano, Les Morts, Hunnenschlacht, and Piano Sonata in B minor*.\(^\text{177}\)

Based on the Gregorian chants *Magnificat* and *Crux fidelis*, the Cross motif finds a place in Liszt’s program music at moments of spiritual intensity. In *Hunnenschlacht*, a symphonic poem inspired by Wilhlem von Kaulbach’s painting of the same name, the salvation of the Christians from the Huns is represented through the appearance of the Cross motif.\(^\text{178}\) Liszt left a detailed explanation of his use of the Cross motif:

Kaulbach’s world-renowned picture presents two battles - the one on earth, the other in the air, according to the legend that warriors, after their death, continue fighting incessantly as spirits. In the middle of the picture appears the *Cross* and its mystic light;

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\(^{175}\) Floros, *Gustav Mahler: The Symphonies*, 58.


\(^{177}\) Ibid., 152, 156, 158, 256-57, 260, 276, 283.

\(^{178}\) Ibid., 276.
on this my ‘Symphonic Poem’ is founded. The chorale ‘Crux Fidelis’, which is gradually developed, illustrates the idea of the final victory of Christianity in its effectual love to God and man.  

For Liszt, this motif maintains its spiritual value through its representation of the Cross, a Christian symbol relating to the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Aligning with Christian belief, Liszt associates the Cross motif with salvation and redemption. His reverence for the motif can also be seen in *Via Crucis*, a composition which chronicles fourteen stages of the Passion of Christ. The Cross motif appears during significant points of Christ’s Passion, such as when he is nailed to the cross and his death. 

Before using the Cross motif in the first movement of the Second Symphony, the far less dogmatic Mahler employs this motif in the final movement of his First Symphony. In this movement, *Dall’ Inferno al Paradiso* (From Hell to Paradise) Floros describes how the Cross motif is used “to break through the world of the inferno and to lead to the sphere of the paradiso.” Floros accurately emphasizes the importance of this motif, for when it is combined with the Dresden Amen, D major arrives and marks the break through to paradiso. This D major breakthrough needed “to sound as if it had fallen from Heaven, as if it had come from another world,” which explains why Mahler chose such an abrupt modulation. A remarkable passage of compositional innovation, Mahler believed it to be the most profound moment in the First Symphony. 

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180 Ibid., 250-57.
182 This, however, is the second statement of the combined motifs in the First Symphony. The first comes at measure 296, which is also the first time the Cross motif begins with a major second rather than a minor second.
Mahler conceived the end of the First Symphony as the starting point for the Second Symphony, a connection strongly supported by his use of the Cross motif in both works. In a letter to Max Marschalk, Mahler wrote of the Second Symphony: “It may interest you to know that it is the hero of my D major symphony that I bear to his grave, and whose life I reflect, from a higher vantage point, in a clear mirror.” Therefore, the presentation of the Cross motif in the first movement of the Second Symphony is of great importance. In the final movement of the First Symphony Mahler connects it to the paradiso. His early presentation in the Second Symphony implies the continuation of the hero’s journey in a life after death, where unanswered spiritual questions must be addressed.

Furthermore, Mahler’s treatment of the motif as a chorale supports its spiritual importance. Not only is this the first chorale of the work, but its brief isolation strongly contrasts with the preceding polyphonic texture. A distinctive element of Christian musical style, the chorale is a compositional technique favored by Mahler and usually reserved for significant moments. The transition to D major in the First Symphony described above is articulated through a chorale-like statement of the Cross motif and the Dresden Amen. Following this transition, a celebratory chorale ensues confirming that paradiso has been reached. In the Second Symphony, Mahler’s decision to present the spiritually potent Cross motif as the first chorale of the work sets the stage for a series of important chorales to follow.

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186 The concluding keys of these two works also support the idea that the Second Symphony strives to reach a higher level than that achieved at the end of the First Symphony. The paradiso of the First Symphony resolves in D major followed by the ultimate resurrection of the Second Symphony in E-flat major, adopting a well-worn Wagnerian strategy (seen for example in the song context in Tannhäuser, which moves from E-flat major for Wolfram’s song to E major for the title character’s). Mahler thought carefully about key symbolism and used modulation as a descriptive device. In the First Symphony, he describes his decision to represent the arrival at paradiso in the following quote: “After a long search, it became obvious to me that I had to modulate from one key to the next higher one.” See Floros, Gustav Mahler: The Symphonies, 47.
187 Floros, Gustav Mahler: The Symphonies, 47.
These two factors—Mahler’s previous associations with the Cross motif and his treatment and placement of it in the Second Symphony—emphasize its importance in this aesthetic-spiritual credo. However, the explicitly Christian symbol of Liszt bears no ideological associations when employed by Mahler. On the contrary, by folding the symbol into his pantheistic vision, Mahler redirects the spiritual connotations of this Christian symbol to a personal, non-dogmatic declaration of faith.

2.2.4 Dies irae

A Christian symbol that Mahler uses even more extensively in his Second Symphony is the powerful Dies irae sequence. Latin for “Day of Wrath,” the sequence is the part of the Requiem Mass that reflects on Judgment Day. As with the Cross motif, Mahler assigns an important role to the Dies irae, but one far-removed from the traditional religious origin of the sequence.

In his Symphonie fantastique, composed in 1830, Hector Berlioz presented a setting of the Dies irae that opened dramatic possibilities realized by Mahler in his Second Symphony. Donald Mitchell does not hesitate to elaborate on the influence Berlioz surely had on Mahler: “I suppose that one of the most profound influences on Mahler, and particularly on the music of his “Wunderhorn” period, was that of Berlioz, and specifically that of the Symphonie Fantastique.” Mitchell’s study draws many correlations between Symphonie fantastique and the Second Symphony, some of which include programmatic influence, Berlioz’s “March to the Scaffold” and Mahler’s final march, Berlioz’s Valse and Mahler’s Ländler, and the use of the E-

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flat clarinet in both works.\textsuperscript{190} Mahler’s career as a composer offered him many opportunities to conduct and study Berlioz’s music, and frequently he chose \textit{Symphonie fantastique}, of which he offered the contradictory remark, “though this work is not perhaps one of the highest artistic achievements,” it contained such “inspiration and originality that it fully deserved a hearing.”\textsuperscript{191} Of primary concern in the present study is Berlioz’s setting of the \textit{Dies irae}, of which Mitchell claims that “Mahler took the idea of using the \textit{Dies Irae} motive as part of his stock Judgment Day imagery.”\textsuperscript{192}

For Mahler, the crucial element of Berlioz’s \textit{Dies irae} is the mystification of the sequence through its immersion in Berlioz’s program. Malcolm Boyd attributes to Berlioz both a secularization of the sequence and the establishment of a supernatural connotation that would follow it throughout the nineteenth-century.\textsuperscript{193} It is in the fifth movement, entitled “Songe d’une nuit du sabbat” (Sabbath Night’s Dream), during which the \textit{Dies irae} is presented. Following the fourth movement, “Marche au supplice” (March to the Scaffold) at which point the protagonist witnesses his own execution, Berlioz describes the Sabbath Night’s Dream as follows:

\begin{quote}
He sees himself at the witches’ sabbath, in the midst of a ghastly crowd of spirits, sorcerers, and monsters of every kind, assembled for his funeral…Funeral knell, ludicrous parody of the \textit{Dies irae}, sabbath dance. The sabbath dance and the \textit{Dies irae} in combination.\textsuperscript{194}
\end{quote}

Berlioz’s descriptive Sabbath is reminiscent of Adam Mickiewicz’s Forefathers’ Eve celebration, not only in language, but also in the ceremonial event with loose ties to Christian tradition. The

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
\bibitem{190} Mitchell, \textit{Gustav Mahler: The Wunderhorn Years: Chronicles and Commentaries}, 333-37.
\bibitem{191} La Grange, \textit{Gustav Mahler}, vol. 1, 491.
\bibitem{192} Mitchell, \textit{Gustav Mahler: The Wunderhorn Years: Chronicles and Commentaries}, 335.
\bibitem{194} Hector Berlioz, \textit{Symphonie fantastique}, ed. Nicholas Temperley (Kassel: Bärenreiter, 1971), VIII.
\end{thebibliography}
program clarifies that Berlioz used the religious affiliations of a Christian symbol for his own artistic intentions, as did Mahler after him.

In musical terms, Berlioz’s treatment of the Dies irae aligns with his programmatic description. After a pictorial introduction, which includes his varied idée fixe, the Dies irae enters in solitude before undergoing frantic rhythmic diminutions.\(^{195}\) Then the Ronde du Sabbat (Sabbath Round) is presented, only to be mockingly combined with Dies irae, as the program suggests.

In a context less fantastical than Berlioz’s, but also far less dogmatic than traditional settings, Mahler’s Dies irae enters in the first movement of the Second Symphony. Its first statement takes place at m. 270, the first chorale after the Cross motif chorale at m. 74. Strikingly solemn due to the significance of the chorale and the gravity of the sequence, this presentation leads into a foreshadowing interaction of themes. In m. 82, the Cross motif is introduced and then quickly overtaken by what Floros labels the Resurrection motif and Eternity motif. Yet the momentary light provided by these themes is decimated by the despair of the interrupting Dies irae in m. 88. The entire section, which returns in mm. 289-309 of the fifth movement, declares that resurrection cannot be achieved until judgment, as represented by the Dies irae, has been passed.

When it returns in the finale, the Dies irae maintains its connection to the Resurrection and Eternity motifs, thus cementing the seemingly indestructible link between judgment and resurrection. The first two statements of the Dies irae, labeled by Floros as the first and second eschatological statements of the Caller of the apocalypse, have parallel functions.\(^{196}\) Each eight-

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\(^{196}\) Floros, *Gustav Mahler: The Symphonies*, 68.
bar iteration of the *Dies irae* is followed by the Resurrection motif (mm. 62-77 and mm. 142-161). In a unification similar to the first movement, the conjunction of *Dies irae* and Resurrection motif implies that resurrection cannot be achieved without judgment.

Reinforcing this thematic relationship, the *Dies irae* resounds throughout Mahler’s depiction of the Last Judgment, a scene that progresses to the section foreshadowed in the first movement. Commencing with a percussive crescendo arriving at m. 194, this is the moment when “the graves spring open,” and the dead will march to their judgment. \(^{(197)}\) The following depiction of fear and chaos leads to fragmentary statements of the *Dies irae* in mm. 210-219. At m. 220 the *Dies irae* is transformed into a march by process of thematic metamorphosis characteristic of Liszt. Appropriately, it is to this form of the *Dies irae* that the dead “come marching along in a mighty procession.”\(^{(198)}\)

The procession continues until the return of material from the first movement, announced by the *Dies irae* in chorale form. It appears as though nothing has changed, for the Resurrection and Eternity motifs are once again halted by the overpowering *Dies irae* in m. 307, culminating in a climactic collapse at m. 310. This, however, is the last complete statement of the *Dies irae*, which is followed by the conclusion of the first part of the movement through the united Eternity and Ascension motifs. Throughout the second half of the finale of the symphony, during which Mahler introduces soprano and alto soloists with mixed choir, the *Dies irae* does not appear. The Resurrection, Eternity, and Ascension motifs are no longer inhibited by the weight of the ever-recurring *Dies irae*. Thus, ultimate resurrection is no longer eternally intertwined with judgment, a concept in stark contradiction with Christian dogma.

\(^{(197)}\) Reilly, “*Todtenfeier* and the Second Symphony,” 123.
\(^{(198)}\) Ibid.
It is this contradiction, a clear department from Christian dogma, that he seeks to communicate by incorporating the *Dies irae* in his spiritual statement. Berlioz’s outlandish use of the *Dies irae*, specifically in how he transforms a feature of Christian musical faith into mystical imagery, anticipated what Mahler’s imagination would produce in the Second Symphony. Mahler’s *Dies irae* surpasses Berlioz, however, both dramatically and musically. Not only does the sequence take on eschatological implications of severe gravity, which span the entire symphony, but its recurring interaction with other themes and variations supports its grave role. Through a deployment comparable to his use of the Cross motif, Mahler’s *Dies irae* deviates from its traditional role in the Requiem Mass so that it comes to embody the ultimate rejection of Judgment Day.

### 2.2.5 Chorales

The final Christian element with aesthetic significance in the representation of Mahler’s personal spiritual construction is the chorale. As with his treatment of the Cross motif and the *Dies irae*, Mahler incorporates the chorale at moments of spiritual magnitude. Yet, as observed by John Williamson, Mahler’s chorales continually distance themselves from the chorale’s Protestant roots:

> The Mahlerian Chorale, whether decked out in D major splendour in the climaxes of the First and Fifth Symphony, or subjected to muted orchestral colour and surrounded with pastoral shades in the first movement of the Sixth Symphony, derives its symbolism from a further set of associations inextricably bound up with its historical position - in Mahler’s symphonies may be observed the gradual process of secularization which is complete by the time of the last compositions of Alban Berg.\(^\text{199}\)

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\(^{199}\) John Williamson, “Liszt, Mahler and the Chorale,” *Proceedings of the Royal Music Association* 108 (1981-1982): 125. This article examines the relationship of the chorale in the music of Liszt and Mahler. As seen with the Cross motif in this study, Mahler uses the religiously potent chorale for his personal use, whereas Liszt follows a more dogmatic compositional approach: “The contrast of the personalized use of the chorale by Mahler emphasizes the extent to which Liszt and Mahler were alien natures.”
“Unconventional” is perhaps a better description for the chorales of the First and Second Symphonies, as “secularization” surely is not the appropriate word for these spiritually charged compositions. Williamson’s observation, however, that the historical associations of the chorale contribute to their momentum in Mahler’s symphonies is accurate. In addition to the chorales already examined in this chapter, important manifestations also occur in the fourth movement, “Urlicht,” and at the conclusion of the symphony.

“Urlicht,” described by Paul Bekker as the “spiritual fulcrum” of the symphony, serves as a brief premonition of the profound finale.200 The text, taken from Des Knaben Wunderhorn, is as follows:

Oh, little red rose,
Mankind lies in great need,
Mankind lies in great pain,
Rather I would heaven claim.
Then I came upon a wide, broad way,
Where a little angel came and wanted to send me away,
Oh no, I did not let myself be sent away.
I am from God, I want to return to God.
The loving God will grant me a little light,
Will light my way to blissful life eternal and bright.201

The opening of this pivotal movement is marked “very solemn, but simple, like a chorale.”202 After a two-measure introduction by the alto soloist, the brass present an eleven-bar chorale in D-flat major. The “sublime” key of D-flat major (in Bekker’s language) contrasts with the earthly C minor of the preceding scherzo, preparing the way for the heavenly E-flat major of the finale resurrection (the key in which Mahler later chose to end his Eighth Symphony).203

200 Kelly Dean Hanson, “Gustav Mahler’s Symphonies (Gustav Mahlers Sinfonien) by Paul Bekker (1921): A Translation with Commentary,” (PhD diss., University of Colorado at Boulder, 2012), 216.
203 Hanson, “Gustav Mahler’s Symphonies (Gustav Mahlers Sinfonien) by Paul Bekker (1921): A Translation with Commentary,” 212.
However, the celestial chorale serves only as a representation of the desire to be with God, as described in the text, and it shifts quickly to a painfully contrasting C-sharp minor on the statement, “Mankind lies in great need.” Thus, the chorale’s depiction of “blissful life eternal and bright” in union with the religiously ambiguous “God” cannot be realized until the finale.  

In Mahler’s magnificent finale, the chorale introduces the symphony’s text, realizing his ultimate vision of resurrection. Of the eight stanzas of text, the first two are taken from Friedrich Klopstock’s *Resurrection* chorale and the final six were written by Mahler. Only the beginning of Klopstock’s text resonated with Mahler and served as a point of departure for his own conception of resurrection. It is important to note that contained within the stanzas of Klopstock’s poem which Mahler omitted is a direct address of Jesus. Mahler’s choice to replace this distinctly Christian moment in Klopstock’s *Resurrection* with his own text confirms he wished to prevent explicit Christian references in the symphony.

Mahler found inspiration in Klopstock’s work at the funeral of Hans von Bülow: “Then, from the organ loft, the choir sang Klopstock’s chorale *Resurrection!* This hit me like lightning, and everything appeared clearly and distinctly before me!” Powerful and moving, Mahler’s text evokes a sentiment he later expressed when speaking about the spiritual climax of the

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204 Edward R. Reilly speculates that Mahler may have been aware of a poem entitled “Vom jüngsten Tage” (“Of the Last Judgment”) in the collection of poems *Jungbrunnen*, edited by Georg Scherer. This poem incorporates segments of *Urlicht* from *Das Knaben Wunderhorn* but in the context of the Last Judgment and explicitly refers to Jesus Christ. For the present study, Mahler’s knowledge of this poem would be significant considering he chose to use the *Wunderhorn* text which does not directly refer to Jesus, supporting his non-dogmatic spirituality. Unfortunately, Reilly only raises the question and offers no supporting evidence that Mahler was familiar with the “Vom jüngsten Tage” version of *Urlicht*. See Edward R. Reilly, “Sketches, Text, Sources, Dating of Manuscripts: Unanswered Questions,” *News about Mahler Research* 30 (October 1993): 3-9.


symphony: “And behold: there is no judgment. There is no sinner, no righteous man - no great and no small. There is no punishment and no reward!” 207

The entrance of the choir at m. 472 sets the first stanza of Klopstock’s text with a chorale version of the Resurrection motif. Stanzas two, four, and eight also are set to chorales, all based on the Resurrection motif except the fourth which is set to chorale versions of the Eternity and Ascension motifs. The text of these four stanzas is as follows: 208

Stanza 1:
Arise, yes, you will arise from the dead,
My dust, after a short rest!
Eternal life
Will be given you by him who called you.

Stanza 2:
To bloom again are you sown.
The lord of the harvest goes
And gathers the sheaves,
Us who have died.

- Friedrich Klopstock

Stanza 4:
What was created must perish.
What has perished must rise again.
Tremble no more!
Prepare yourself to live!

Stanza 8:
Arise, yes, you will arise from the dead,
My heart, in an instant!
What you have conquered
Will bear you to God.

- Gustav Mahler

208 Gustav Mahler, Symphonies Nos. 1 and 2 in Full Score.
In regards to belief systems, here the piece has broken from the restraints of traditional religion. Yet these four stanzas, embodying the culmination of Mahler’s personal eschatology, are expressed by means of the chorale, albeit one emptied of its traditional associations. Thus an element of Christian heritage is employed to reject the Christian notion of a Judgment Day. Mahler turned to the chorale to articulate his “holy,” “heavenly,” private idea of resurrection.  

Conclusion

Even the most prominent Mahler scholars have imposed Christianity onto Mahler’s Second Symphony. Floros claims the apocalyptic scene in the finale was “nothing other than the message of the Second Coming,” while Bekker describes this movement as an “Easter proclamation.” Perhaps these statements would be more plausible had Mahler been a conventional Catholic. Yet given Mahler’s idiosyncratic theology, and his direct experience with antisemitism, linking him to conventional Christianity is a bridge too far.

Rather than an embrace of Christianity, this work shows Mahler’s attraction to aesthetic and stylistic materials associated with religion, materials that deployed to meet wholly personal ends. Of greatest importance are the Cross motif, the Dies irae sequence, and the chorale. Mahler used their spiritual potency and metaphysical implications to profess his private, unorthodox beliefs. In a stroke of great irony, symbols which were at one point used to proclaim a religious creed are composed into a statement which ultimately rejects those beliefs.

210 Floros, Gustav Mahler: The Symphonies, 75.
211 Hanson, “Gustav Mahler’s Symphonies (Gustav Mahlers Sinfonien) by Paul Bekker (1921): A Translation with Commentary,” 237.
Chapter 3

Gustav Fechner’s Unseen Presence in the Second Symphony

Introduction

Jewish and Christian ideologies failed to provide Mahler with the ultimate truths he sought when composing his monumental symphonies. A spiritual void left by these traditional belief systems motivated the contemplative composer to seek answers in less traditional places. One oft-overlooked source of spiritual inspiration for Mahler is the mystical writings of Gustav Theodor Fechner. Fechner’s role in Mahler’s heterogeneous worldview has been evaluated in some detail with respect to the Third Symphony.212 A clear connection between the eschatological statement of the Second Symphony and Fechner’s writings likewise exists, but this relationship has yet to be formally addressed. As Chapters 1 and 2 have revealed, the nature and origin of the Second Symphony is deeply nuanced in its peculiar heterogeneity: it adheres to no single religious or spiritual dogma. By analyzing Fechner’s role in this work, one can come closer to understanding what Mahler intended to communicate. This chapter will explore how Fechner’s philosophy, and specifically The Little Book of Life After Death, which he wrote in 1835, played a formative role in the program and composition of Mahler’s Second Symphony.

3.1 Who was Gustav Theodor Fechner?

As in the case of Mahler, both science and religion were unable to present Gustav Theodor Fechner with adequate answers to life’s most fundamental questions. Therefore no simple encapsulation of the philosopher’s multifaceted worldview can exist. The spiritual philosophy of

Fechner’s writings emerged from a seemingly normal life. He was born on April 19, 1801 in Großräschén of Lusatia, Germany. Although his father, uncle, and grandfathers were all pastors, Fechner chose to study medicine at the University of Leipzig. It was there he settled for the duration of his life. While studying medicine Fechner learned two important things: first, he declared himself an atheist, and second, he found that he was not interested in becoming a practicing physician. Thus while he received bachelor and master’s degrees in medicine and teaching, he never completed the necessary requirements to become a practicing physician.

Fechner’s atheism, which developed out of the rigid materialist approach required in medicine, was soon challenged by readings he encountered through his insatiable thirst for knowledge, particularly regarding the philosophy of nature. The writings of the philosophers Lorenz Oken and Friedrich Schelling had a profound effect on Fechner’s ever evolving worldview. A comment recorded by Fechner’s nephew and biographer, J.E. Kuntze, demonstrates the gravity of this impact:

> My studies in medicine had convinced me to become an atheist, estranged from religious notions; I now saw the world as a set of mechanical workings. Then I discovered Oken’s philosophy of nature and began reading it together with my friend Spielberg, a student of theology. It suddenly shed new light on the whole world, including science, and I was dazzled.

Fechner’s reading thus diverted him from the natural sciences to a hybrid of science and philosophy, recalling the heterogeneous pursuits of such thinkers as Oken and Schelling.

Fechner’s ironic side found a vehicle through which he could mock the materialist nature of medicine in his pseudonym Dr. Mises. The alternate personality—an artistic conceit rather
than a pathological condition—allowed a creative counterpart to coexist with the highly scientific professor. Examples of these satirical writings include *Proof that the Moon is Made of Iodine*, *Comparative Anatomy of Angels*, and *Defensive Measures for Cholera*. An especially curious example of Fechner’s academically guised humor manifests itself in *Defensive Measures for Cholera*. This essay defends cholera as a necessary part of biological life, rather than a guide to prevention.\(^{218}\)

In 1839, Fechner succumbed to a devastating mental and physical breakdown, the causes of which remain obscure.\(^{219}\) The exact diagnosis and origin of this illness cannot be known, mainly because a blurred boundary between the physical and mental symptoms creates ambiguity. By 1834 Fechner resigned from his post teaching physics (a position he accepted for financial reasons) after it was evident these symptoms were not passing.\(^{220}\) Excessive exhaustion and severe headaches were accompanied by a period of blindness, which occurred after prolonged study of visual after-images induced by viewing the sun.\(^{221}\) This forced Fechner to wear a blindfold regularly and stay isolated in a dark room with several layers of curtains drawn. In addition to his blindness, the health crisis persisted until Fechner was unable to eat or drink as a result of a deteriorating digestive system.\(^{222}\) He passed his time reflecting on his wish for death while playing with twine or cutting pieces of cardboard.\(^{223}\) Fechner later described the mental toll as a fight against a “point of no return,” a constant battle against insanity.\(^{224}\) Indeed, the loss

\(^{219}\) Heidelberger, *Nature from Within*, 47.
\(^{220}\) Ibid., 26, 47.
\(^{221}\) Ibid., 47.
\(^{222}\) Fechner, *Religion of a Scientist*, 38.
\(^{223}\) Ibid., 39.
\(^{224}\) Ibid., 39-40.
of the faculties which allow an intellectual such as Fechner to engage in life must surely have been nothing less than torture.

Satisfactory explanations for his recovery are elusive, yet Fechner attributes it to the unending aid of his wife and his focus on “religious thoughts.”225 Considering this personal conviction, the nature of his recovery matches the peculiarity of the illness itself. A family acquaintance claimed she dreamt she made a dish of “raw ham carefully freed from fat and finely chopped, then strongly spiced and soaked in Rheinwein and lemon juice” for Fechner.226 Interpreting her dream as a sign, she acted upon it and made the dish for him. Fechner found he was able to consume it in small quantities. Unfortunately, this only had a temporary effect and soon he returned to a state of despair. In 1840, after three years of inexplicable pain, an abrupt and positive change occurred in his health.227 He began consuming food again, only through slow chewing, while slowly exposing his eyes to light and gradually attempting to speak again.

Several other theories exist regarding Fechner’s strange illness, though none are conclusive. One explanation considers severe depression combined with hypochondriasis, a creative illness from which one emerges with new philosophical insight and a transformed personality.228 Other theories suggest depression and hypochondria heightened by retina damage,229 while some claim it was the manifestation of a nervous breakdown.230 Although the finer details of this event remain vague, it unquestionably had a profound impact on Fechner’s subsequent intellectual pursuits.

225 Fechner, Religion of a Scientist, 42.
226 Ibid., 38.
227 Heidelberger, Nature from Within, 49.
229 Ibid., 13-14.
230 Fechner, Religion of a Scientist, 36.
The nature of Fechner’s writings would eventually evolve into an obscure new scholarly discipline, psychophysics, with his recovery acting as a catalyst. He had already begun his transition from physicist to philosopher prior to his illness. In 1835, he published *The Little Book of Life After Death* and although it was presented under his pseudonym, it is considered a serious work because it was written with the intention of comforting people close to him in mourning. It also served as the foundation of his works to come. Fechner describes his recovery in these terms:

I am certain that I believed God himself called me to do extraordinary things and that my suffering had prepared me for it, that I felt that I in part possessed extraordinary psychic and physical powers, and in part was on my way to achieving them, that the whole world now appeared to me in another light, than it had before and does now; the riddles of the world seemed to reveal themselves; my earlier life had been extinguished and the present crisis seemed to be a new birth.\(^{231}\)

Fechner viewed his recovery as a rebirth, the start of a second life in which he was granted new vision, both literally and metaphorically.

Fechner’s conviction that scientific methods could be used to prove spiritual concepts defines the essence of his new works. In 1846 he resumed teaching at the University of Leipzig, although he did not wish to be reinstated as a full-time professor.\(^{232}\) This arrangement allowed him to speak on the philosophical topics that consumed his focus. Subjects of his lectures included life after death, anthropology, the human body and soul, in addition to psychophysics and aesthetics.\(^{233}\) His writing followed a similar development, reaching a significant milestone with his publication of *Nanna - or on the Soul Life of Plants* in 1848, a classic example of scientifically backed spirituality.\(^{234}\) His developing fascination with the mind and body

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\(^{231}\) Heidelberger, *Nature from Within*, 49.


\(^{233}\) Heidelberger, *Nature from Within*, 50.

\(^{234}\) Ibid., 54.
relationship culminated in *Zend-Avesta, or Concerning the Things of Heaven and the Hereafter from the Standpoint of the Observation of Nature* in 1851. This book developed concepts from *The Little Book of Life After Death*, focusing on the belief of a fully animated universe. This animistic worldview would become a major component of Mahler’s Third Symphony.

*Elements of Psychophysics* also strives to integrate religious and philosophical matters through scientific experimentation. Throughout his philosophical development, Fechner never relinquished the scientific approach integral to his study of medicine. Published in 1860, *Elements of Psychophysics* maintains its role as Fechner’s most remembered work. Considered the founding work of psychophysics, it explores a mathematical relationship between stimulus and sensations. An analysis of this relationship takes place with the search for supporting empirical evidence. According to Fechner, the thesis of this book came to him in a mystical experience while lying in bed one morning just after waking up. While externally the book may seem scientific, as it is filled with formulas and other applications of scientific technique, the central claims are in fact the metaphysical concepts about which Fechner had already been writing in less overtly scientific works.

In addition to *The Little Book of Life After Death* and *Zend-Avesta, The Day View Opposed to the Night View* greatly influenced Mahler’s worldview. Published in 1878, it summarizes his spiritual beliefs in the context of the current philosophical ideals. The Day View represents Fechner’s pantheistic worldview while the Night View contrast it with the materialist, non-spiritual and mechanistic approach to understanding the world.

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236 Ibid.
3.2 Documentary Evidence

Numerous sources confirm Mahler’s fascination with Fechner’s writings. Although there is no comprehensive record of the contents of Mahler’s library, Anna Mahler donated her mother’s library to the University of Pennsylvania. This collection contains over five thousand books, many of which were Mahler’s. Fechner is represented by five works: *Stapelia Mixta, Ueber die Seelenfrage. Ein Gang durch die sichtbare Welt, um die unsichtbare zu finden, Zend-Avesta,* and *Nanna oder über das Seelenleben der Pflanzen.* This copy of *Zend-Avesta* contains an inscription from Mahler to his friend, Theobald Pollak, on the cover page. Since the book remained in Mahler’s possession, one can infer this copy of *Zend-Avesta* was a gift the ill Pollak never received. In 1910 Mahler wrote a letter of encouragement wishing him a speedy recovery from a severe relapse of his lung condition. Pollak, an old friend of Emil Schindler, was well acquainted with Alma and through her befriended Mahler. In any case, this episode confirms that Mahler was indeed familiar with the work.

The occasions in which Mahler mentions Fechner in his letters to Alma reveal a profound respect for the philosopher. The earliest dates from April 2, 1903. Although Mahler does not discuss Fechner extensively, he offers a brief thought on his writings:

> At intervals I read *Zend-Avesta* with engrossing interest; it comes home to me with the intimacy of what I have long known and seen and experienced myself. Remarkable how close in feeling Fechner is to Rückert: they are two nearly

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241 Ibid., 113-14.
242 Ibid., 146.
245 While the presence of a book in this library does not mean Mahler read it, this inscription combined with additional evidence found in his letters and the recollections of friends and colleagues supports his familiarity with these works and others not listed. Similarly, the absence of a book in this collection does not conclude Mahler did not read it, as is the case with *The Little Book of Life After Death.* For example, several works that had great influence on Mahler, such as works by Rückert, Schiller, and Dostoyevsky, are absent.

In October of the same year, Mahler commends Alma for reading Fechner as well. He writes, “I am terribly glad that you are reading Fechner.”\footnote{Barham, “Mahler’s Third Symphony and Philosophy of Gustav Fechner,” 55; It should be noted that this is an example of a book by Fechner that Mahler had read but does not appear in the collection at the University of Pennsylvania.} This brief statement not only confirms that Mahler was familiar with Fechner but that he thought highly of him. Mahler mentions Fechner once again in a letter from August 1905. Here he describes his enjoyment in reading Fechner’s \textit{Vorschule der Aesthetik}, finding it “extremely interesting” and encouraging Alma to read it.\footnote{Ibid., 263.}

Bruno Walter also provides details on Mahler’s interest in Fechner, stating, “Fechner’s \textit{Zend-Avesta} made a lasting impression upon him, and the same author’s \textit{Nana, or the Soul-Life of Plants}, was a real source of joy.”\footnote{Bruno Walter, \textit{Gustav Mahler}, trans. James Galston (New York: The Greystone Press, 1941), 134.} In his own autobiography, Walter reflects on the potential relationship between Fechner and Mahler. “It was a pity that Mahler never made the acquaintance of Fechner. The author of \textit{Zend-Avesta} would surely have become his friend.”\footnote{Barham, “Mahler’s Third Symphony and Philosophy of Gustav Fechner,” 61.}

Other acquaintances, such as Paul Stefan and Ferdinand Pfohl had similar memories.

Stefan describes in his recollections of Mahler how he

was familiar with the philosophers, especially with Kant and Schopenhauer; later Fechner, Lotze, and Helmholtz were added...Philosophy, particularly where it bordered on the natural sciences, continually attracted him; how vigorously, for example, he followed the researches of Reinke; religious impulse led him here as it did to Fechner.\footnote{Ibid., 60.}

Pfohl, Mahler’s good friend and well-known critic,\footnote{La Grange, \textit{Gustav Mahler}, vol. 2, 176.} also recounts the pleasure Mahler found in Fechner:
The more valuable the book, the more he treasured it; for example, Dostoyevsky’s “Raskolnikoff” and Fechner’s psychological-philosophical writings which strongly aroused the powers of his imagination.  

That Pfhol and Stefan knew of Mahler’s fascination with Fechner reveals that his interest was deep and extensive.

Perhaps the most important figure in documenting Mahler’s exposure to Fechner is Siegfried Lipiner. La Grange suggests that Mahler first began reading Fechner on the advice of Lipiner. In the summer of 1876, Lipiner went to Leipzig to study informally with Fechner. The two formed a significant relationship; the generally reclusive Lipiner was often seen socializing with the equally introverted Fechner. Interestingly, without Lipiner’s encouragement Fechner would never have written *The Day View Opposed to the Night View*. Fechner’s influence on Lipiner was as equally powerful, as evidenced by Lipiner’s recommendation of Fechner to Mahler.

Lipiner was very knowledgeable in the field of spirituality. He had studied Schopenhauer, Kant, Goethe, the Bible and Christianity, and Eastern philosophy. It was for this reason that Mahler considered him a point of spiritual reference. Mahler searched these philosophies for answers to life’s existential questions, one of the most important being the question of life after death.

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256 Heidelberger, *Nature from Within*, 62.
257 La Grange, *Gustav Mahler*, vol. 4, 481.
3.3 Origin and Programs of the Second Symphony

Death was at the heart of the Second Symphony’s conception, beginning with Mahler’s preoccupation with his own death and culminating at the funeral of Hans von Bülow. In 1888, he spoke to Natalie Bauer-Lechner of a haunting vision connected with the first movement, also known as Todtenfeier. This image consisted of his own body lying in a coffin, surrounded by wreaths and flowers from the successful premiere of Die drei Pintos. The deaths of his father, mother and sister, Leopoldine, in the following year exacerbated Mahler’s obsession. The first movement was left as a fair copy and the symphony was not revisited until the summer of 1893, a little less than a year prior to the pivotal experience, Bülow’s funeral.

On March 29, 1894 Mahler attended the memorial service of Hans von Bülow, through which he received his ultimate inspiration for the Second Symphony. In a letter to Dr. Arthur Seidl, Mahler recalls the moment inspiration struck him:

   The mood in which I sat and pondered on the departed was utterly in the spirit of what I was working on at the time. - Then the choir, up in the organ-loft, intoned Klopstock’s Resurrection chorale. - It flashed on me like lightning, and everything became plain and clear in my mind! It was the flash that all creative artists wait for – “conceiving by the Holy Ghost!”

Mahler began work on the remaining movements of his Second Symphony immediately after this experience, his vision of life after death complete. Resurrection was the answer which he sought: redemption from the ever-haunting death. Mahler, obsessed with the unknown of death, found comfort in the concept of resurrection.

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A thorough analysis of the existing programs will lay a foundation through which the contextual role of Fechner’s writings can be studied. Three programs for the Second Symphony exist, although by 1901 Mahler was reluctant to provide a specific outline. The earliest of these was recorded by Natalie Bauer-Lechner in January 1896, when Mahler and Bruno Walter performed a piano reduction of the symphony for Natalie. The following morning Mahler communicated to her programs for all five movements of the work. Mahler briefly describes the first movement as the struggle of a “mighty being caught in the toils of this world; grappling with life and with the fate to which he must succumb - and his death.” He continues to explain that the second and third movements are “episodes from the life of the fallen hero,” the second presenting love only to be counteracted by the despair of the third. He expounds on the troubling third movement, saying,

If, at a distance, you watch a dance through a window, without being able to hear the music, then the turning and twisting movement of the couples seems senseless, because you are not catching the rhythm that is the key to it all. You must imagine that to one who has lost his identity and his happiness, the world looks like this - distorted and crazy, as if reflected in a concave mirror. The Scherzo ends with the appalling shriek of this tortured soul.

The fourth movement he summed up more succinctly in a simple description stating, “The “Urlicht” represents the soul’s striving and questioning attitude towards God and its own immortality.” Following this we receive a descriptive account of the finale.

The program of the fifth movement contains Mahler’s rejection of the Christianity which opens a spiritual void filled by Fechnerian concepts. Mahler tells Bauer-Lechner that this movement is an “inward experience”—a realization of the epiphany Mahler experienced at Hans von Bülow’s funeral, dealing with “the resolution to life’s terrible problem – redemption.”

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According to Bauer-Lechner’s account, this movement begins with a view of the Last Judgment through the traditional Jewish and Christian beliefs. As it progresses, people of all kinds are led to their judgment in a cacophony of despair. Then, in a moment of utmost significance, Mahler deviates from traditional dogma, claiming that there is “no Last Judgment, no souls saved and none damned; no just man, no evil-doer, no judge!” Bauer-Lechner recalls that the rest of the piece could be understood through the text and Mahler even said, “I absolutely refuse to give another syllable of explanation!”

The second program was written later that year, on March 26, 1896, to Max Marschalk, a critic and friend of Mahler. The letter that contains the program also includes a response to Marschalk’s interpretation of the First Symphony, one Mahler found favorable. The letter begins with a brief discourse on programs. Mahler clearly is developing ideas about the concept but still feels it necessary to provide the listener with “signposts and milestones on his journey - or rather, with a map of the heavens, that he can get a picture of the night sky with all its luminous worlds.”

This program only addresses the first three movements, but Mahler articulates the contrast of movements two and three more effectively than with Bauer-Lechner. Mahler writes to Marschalk that the Second Symphony grows directly out of the First, even saying, “it is the hero of my D major symphony that I bear to his grave, and whose life I reflect, from a higher vantage point, in a clear mirror.” He continues to write about the questions presented in the first movement, questions that are crucial for a continuation of life on this earth, and ones that will be answered in the final movement. “What did you live for? Why did you suffer? Is it all only a

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265 Ibid.
vast, terrifying joke?” In this account of the program, Mahler elaborates more on the second movement, giving an insightful view into this retrospective memory. It is “a ray of sunlight, pure and cloudless, out of that hero’s life.” He relates it to the experience of forgetting someone close to you has died because you were so consumed by a memory of them. As though a reaction, the third movement awakens you from the dream of the second and reminds you that death has transpired. His description of the third movement echoes Bauer-Lechner’s account; he uses the imagery of a dance hall being viewed from the outside and emphasizes the meaningless chaos of the world. Mahler leaves his program with the first three movements and refrains from explaining the last two, saying, “What follows is certainly clear to you!”266

The third program demonstrates that Mahler’s convictions about program music had come into focus, particularly regarding his Second Symphony. The final program was written for a performance of the work on December 20, 1901 in Dresden.267 Alma, who received the program in a letter, is the primary source of this account.268 As in his letter to Marschalk, Mahler gives a disclaimer about programs at the beginning of the letter revealing a belief about organized religion. Speaking of the program, Mahler writes, “In fact, as all religious dogmas do, it leads directly to misunderstanding, to a flattening and coarsening, and in the long run to such distortion that the work, and still more its creator, is utterly unrecognizable.” Considering that this letter was written several years after the previous ones, it is clear that his convictions about program music had solidified.

Although similar to the previous programs, the final one contains additions important to understanding the third movement. This contributes to the collective understanding that can be

266 Mahler, Selected Letters, 178-81.
gained from viewing all three programs. The first movement reflects on the familiar entombed hero and confronts life’s seemingly unanswerable questions. Again, the second movement is summarized concisely; Mahler only writes that it is, “a blissful moment in his life and a mournful memory of youth and lost innocence.” The third movement deviates from the previously used metaphors and provides insightful elaboration on the despair heard in the movement, specifically spiritual despair. He writes how

The spirit of unbelief, of presumption, has taken possession of him, he beholds the tumult of appearances and together with the child’s pure understanding he loses the firm footing that love alone affords; he despairs of himself and of God. The world and life become for him a disorderly apparition; disgust for all being and becoming lays hold of him with an iron grip and drives him to cry out in desperation.269

This description of the Scherzo is the most valuable aspect of this program given that Mahler reveals the meaning behind his vision of seeing the world as senseless and chaotic. It is the despair of one who has lost faith in love.

Mahler does not elaborate on the program of the fourth and fifth movements. He claims the text of the “Urlicht” poem used in the fourth movement is sufficient explanation:

Oh, little red rose,
Mankind lies in great need,
Mankind lies in great pain.
Rather I would heaven claim.
Then I came upon a wide, broad way,
Where a little angel came and wanted to send me away,
Oh no, I did not let myself be sent away.
I am from God, I want to return to God.
The loving God will grant me a little light,
Will light my way to blissful life eternal and bright.270

269 Mahler, Memories and Letters, 213-214.
Mahler’s description of the finale also offers a small, yet important, addition to the previous programs. After describing in a similar way the absence of punishment, sinners, and rewards, Mahler writes, “An almighty feeling of love illumines us with blessed knowing and being.”

3.4 Fechner and the Second Symphony

The manifestations of Fechner’s ideas play both an overt and a subtle role in the Second Symphony. While there is no formal documentation that these ideas shaped the work, the correlations between Fechner’s writings and Mahler’s symphony are strong enough to suggest they were at the forefront of Mahler’s vision while he composed this work. The relationship between these two great minds is found both in the overarching concepts, and in specific details.

The fundamental starting point of this argument is the belief of life after death. Fechner believed that humans experience three lives. He starts The Little Book of Life After Death with this exact claim:

Man lives upon the earth not once, but three times. His first stage of life is a continuous sleep; the second is an alternation between sleeping and waking; the third is eternal waking.

The third stage is a life after death. For Fechner, death as a transition to the third stage is no different than birth to the second. The parallels between these two transitions form one aspect of Fechner’s argument for life after death. He compares a child in the womb to our souls in the body. In each instance, the child or soul is blind to the existence and joy of the following stage, and both transitions can be painful and traumatizing. Regarding death as birth, Fechner writes:

But death is only a second birth into a freer existence, in which the spirit breaks through its slender covering and abandons inaction and sloth, as the child does in its first birth.

273 Ibid., 25.
Many of Fechner’s writings build on this belief that death is not an end, but rather a second birth into a third stage of existence. To support this relatively abstract claim, Fechner employs a scientific argument. He suggests that when we die, our bodies do not disappear but become part of the natural earth; therefore it is only logical, in Fechner’s view, to believe that our inner soul would not cease to exist but would also become part of the spiritual world.\(^{274}\)

Death as birth is expressed explicitly in the text Mahler wrote for the finale in the words, “Bereite dich zu leben!” (Prepare yourself to live!) and, “Sterben werd’ ich, um zu leben!” (I shall die, so as to live!).\(^{275}\) This line comes at the end, when all the dead have risen and realized there will be no judgment. From a Fechnerian standpoint, eternal life will come from the death of this life.

The fact Mahler wrote these lines suggests they fully represent his beliefs. He searched for a pre-existing text but found nothing that articulated his thoughts. In a letter to Dr. Arthur Seidl, Mahler wrote

> In the last movement of my Second I simply had to go through the whole of world literature, including the Bible, in search of the right word, the “Open Sesame” - and in the end I had no choice but to find my own words for my thoughts and feelings.\(^{276}\)

Mahler’s text emphasizes that this life is not in vain and that something will come of a person’s struggles. Fechner’s conviction that our experiences in this life shape our afterlife undoubtedly comforted Mahler. Fechner states, “This is the great justice of creation, that everyone makes for himself the conditions of his future life.”\(^{277}\) Again, Fechner looks at this concept from a logical

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\(^{274}\) Fechner, *Life After Death*, 27.


\(^{277}\) Fechner, *Life After Death*, 33.
perspective rather than a strictly spiritual or religious one. It is a law of nature that if our soul is healthy in this life, then our being of the next life will be born in fertile ground:

And, according as the man has been good or bad, has behaved nobly or basely, was industrious or idle, will he find himself possessed of an organism, healthy or sick, beautiful or hateful, strong or weak, in the world to come, and his free activity in this world will determine his relation to other souls, his destiny, his capacity and talents for further progress in that world.278

This concept too is realized in the text of the finale: “Everything is yours that you have desired/ Yours, what you have loved, what you have struggled for/ Oh believe/ You were not born in vain/ Have not lived in vain, suffered in vain!”279 The idea of enduring the tragedies of this life without any type of redemption was unbearable for Mahler. This concept is in itself an answer to the many questions posed in the first movement. “What next? What is life? What is death? Have we any continuing existence? Is it all an empty dream, or has this life of ours, and our death, a meaning?”280 Fechner is addressing these questions from a rational standpoint, claiming that this life is not meaningless, but is of utmost importance because it will shape our next stage of existence.

Fechner also addresses the very question Mahler poses in his program for Max Marschalk: “Why did you suffer?”281 For Fechner, if one on earth is brave enough to fight life’s challenges, this will have a positive impact on their soul, contributing to a healthier soul in the third stage:

Rejoice then, even you whose soul is here tried by tribulation and sorrow; the discipline will avail much, which in the brave struggle with obstacles in the path of progress you have experienced in this life, and, born into the new life with more strength, you will more quickly and joyfully recover what fate has denied you here.282

278 Fechner, Life After Death, 33-34.
279 Mahler, Symphonies Nos. 1 and 2 in Full Score, 378-79.
280 Mahler, Memories and Letters, 213-14.
281 Mahler, Selected Letters, 178-81.
282 Fechner, Life After Death, 35.
Writing about the third stage of life, Fechner adds, “He who has been misunderstood here on earth will there find recognition.”

It is important to distinguish Fechner’s beliefs, and Mahler’s appropriation of them, from traditional Christian dogma. Fechner approaches eschatology from the standpoint of science as a tool to prove life after death. This accounts for the rational methodology he uses to make his arguments. When he arrives at the conclusion that life after death does indeed exist, it is only the result of natural laws, which is why our actions in this world shape the nature of the next. He makes it clear that this should not be mistaken for Christian beliefs:

> Deeds will not be requited to the man through exterior rewards or punishments; there is no heaven and no hell in the usual sense of the Christian, the Jew, the heathen, into which the soul may enter after death.\(^{284}\)

These concepts of Fechner’s writings may appear to be contradictory. The distinction between his belief and Christian dogma is that the nature of the third stage is not based on reward or punishment for our actions but rather is determined by our behavior as a natural progression. This Fechnerian concept accounts for the fundamental cornerstone of the Second Symphony. As shown in the programs, Mahler rejects the same religious dogmas Fechner argues against. In both the Bauer-Lechner and Dresden programs Mahler denounces the Last Judgment. These programs express Mahler’s belief that death will not lead to eternal salvation or damnation. This connects strongly with Mahler’s conviction that death is the ultimate equalizer, which is also an outgrowth of Fechner’s vision of life after death. In the Bauer-Lechner program, Mahler said,

> Now they all come marching along in a mighty procession: beggars and rich men, common folk and kings, the Church Militant, the Popes. All give vent to the same terror, same lamentations and paroxysms; for none is just in the sight of God.\(^{285}\)

In the Dresden program, he writes with similar imagery:

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283 Fechner, *Life After Death*, 64.
284 Ibid., 33.
The earth trembles, graves burst open, the dead arise and step forth in [long] endless files. The great and the small of this earth, kings and beggars, the just and ungodly - all are making that pilgrimage.\textsuperscript{286}

Additionally, these excerpts emphasize the communal and equal view Mahler had of humanity. Similarly to Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony, Mahler’s Second Symphony was written for all of humanity.

Mahler’s version of this impulse to unite humanity was shaped in part by Fechner, who developed the ideas extensively. According to Fechner, humans should not make the mistake of believing our existence is primarily for ourselves. He writes:

\begin{quote}
Man thinks that he is in his place for himself alone, for amusement, for work, and getting his bodily and mental growth; he, too, is indeed there for himself; but his body and mind are also but a dwelling place into which new and higher impulses enter, mingle, and develop, and engage in all sorts of processes together, which both constitute the feeling and thinking of the man, and have their higher meaning for the third stage of life.\textsuperscript{287}
\end{quote}

Essentially, Fechner believes that we exist not only as individuals but as part of a greater spirituality, a spirituality that will be fully realized in the third stage of life.

Fechner’s writings on remembering the dead permeate the Second Symphony. Fechner believes that communication with the dead is possible. He writes:

\begin{quote}
It is, indeed, possible for the spirits of the living and the dead to meet unconsciously in many ways, and also consciously on one side.

One means there is of attaining the highest conscious meeting between the living and the dead; it is the memory of the living for the dead. To direct our attention to the dead is to awaken theirs to us, just as a charm which is found in a living person encourages a corresponding attraction toward the one perceiving it.\textsuperscript{288}
\end{quote}

Both the Marschalk and Dresden programs begin with not only the image of a well-loved

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{286} Mahler, \textit{Memories and Letters}, 213-14.
\textsuperscript{287} Fechner, \textit{Life After Death}, 36-37.
\textsuperscript{288} Ibid., 47.
\end{flushright}
person in a coffin, but with the viewers reflecting on this person’s life. To Max Marschalk, Mahler writes that it is on the hero, “whose life I reflect.” In the Dresden program he asserts similarly that, “His life, struggles, passions, and aspirations once more, for the last time, pass before our mind’s eye.” Through a Fechnerian interpretation, the meditation on the dead in the first movement is not simply out of respect, but rather a sincere attempt to reunite with the deceased.

This communion is a powerful experience and can have a profound impact on the deceased.

And he will perceive whether we think of him with love or with hatred; and the stronger the loved or the stronger the hatred, the more clearly he will discern it. Once, indeed, you had a remembrance of the dead - now you are able to use that remembrance; you can still knowingly bless or torment the dead with your memories, be reconciled to them or remain in a state of conflict.

Therefore memory alone is not the sole factor in this relationship. The nature of one’s memories determines, in part, the state of existence for the deceased. In the Second Symphony, the reflection of the deceased in the first movement is then followed by two movements that recall episodes from their life. According to Fechner, the memories expressed through these movements are directly impacting the life of the remembered dead in their third stage of life.

All three programs emphasize that movements two and three are memories from the life of the deceased. The second movement is blissful recollection of youth, innocence, and love. From a Fechnerian standpoint, this movement would have a positive impact on the spirit of the deceased, for it is a meditation on a beautiful moment from their life. The third movement shifts from this happiness to the existential crisis the deceased experienced while on earth.

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289 Mahler, Selected Letters, 178-81.  
290 Mahler, Memories and Letters, 213-14.  
291 Fechner, Life After Death, 50.  
As seen in the programs, the third movement is a reflection on the despair that tortured the protagonist. According to Fechner, this movement would perpetuate the “state of conflict” referred to in the passage quoted above.293 Through this memory, Mahler has returned the spirit of the dead to a state of despair, knowing that he will stage the spirit’s redemption in the finale. This finale reconciles the questions that caused such torment in the third movement and therefore redeems the person who is seen lying in a coffin in the first movement.

Fechner also has an impact on the fourth movement, specifically in the title “Urlicht”, which translates to “Primeval Light.”294 Although this text comes from Des Knaben Wunderhorn, Mahler must have sensed the word’s Fechnarian implications. The “Primal Light” of the title appears at the end of the text, “Dear God will grant me a small light/ Will light my way to eternal, blissful life.”295 Fechner uses similar imagery extensively in his discourse on life after death:

But in the moment of death, in which an eternal night darkens the eye of his body, light will begin to dawn in his soul. Then will the center of the inner man kindle into a sun which illuminates his whole spiritual nature, and at the same time penetrates it as with an inner eye, with divine clearness.296

This light is the realization of all that one has learned in his previous lives, yet did not have the faculties to comprehend. On earth, humans are “strangers to their own souls” and this illumination of death is the process through which we know all that we are.297 While this relates to the theme of the fourth movement, it also resonates with the statement that ends the Dresden program: “An overwhelming love lightens our being. We know and we are.”298

293 Fechner, Life After Death, 50.
294 Mahler, Symphonies Nos. 1 and 2 in Full Score, 378-79.
295 Ibid.
296 Fechner, Life After Death, 62.
297 Ibid., 61.
298 Mahler, Memories and Letters, 213-14.
Conclusion

The idiosyncratic theology presented in *The Little Book of Life After Death* shaped numerous elements of the Second Symphony. Considering that Mahler was an avid reader of Fechner, it is highly probable that these writings shaped Mahler’s own beliefs and therefore the core of the Second Symphony. However, Mahler’s interest in this fascinating thinker has gone relatively “unseen,” especially in regards to the Second Symphony. Without understanding this source of Mahler’s worldview, we are left with a seemingly grandiose symphony that may appear overblown. Tragically, this gap would undercut the true depth of the work. Furthermore, Fechner’s mystical writings provided Mahler with one possible solution to the spiritual void left by Judaism and Christianity.
Conclusion

Mahler’s Second Symphony begins with death, a concept most consider to be the ultimate end. For Mahler, however, death is only a birth into a new life. Communicated through a sophisticated symphonic composition, this enlightened belief cannot be fully understood or appreciated without special focus on Mahler’s spiritual influences. Otherwise, the monumental composition is misunderstood as superficial religiosity or incomprehensible genius. In fact, as argued by this thesis, Mahler’s personal heterogeneous spirituality evolved from a continuous fermentation of metaphysical, philosophical, and religious concepts that began in his early childhood.

The religious typology offered in this study is only a beginning. By no means does this examination claim to be conclusive or final; rather it seeks to present new approaches to understanding the complex music and worldview of Gustav Mahler. Chapters 1 and 3 contain the most exciting possibilities for future research, whereas Chapter 2 aims to correct mistaken religious associations with the Second Symphony.

Both Reform Judaism and Gustav Fechner are topics closely related to Mahler that have received little attention in the scholarly world. In his youth, Mahler naturally internalized the less conservative approach of Reform Judaism, a perspective that would ultimately encourage his openness to the innovative ideas of Fechner. These two topics both provide independent paths for future research. Contextualizing Mahler’s Jewishness through the lens of the Reform Movement has the potential to remedy the polarization that now exists in scholarly thought on the nature of his Judaism; the discussion must begin with the realization that Mahler followed an unconventional and progressive path.
Regarding Fechner, this study illuminates concepts found in *The Little Book of Life After Death* that were central to Mahler’s private metaphysics. Similar studies incorporating a greater number of Fechner’s writings on the afterlife, such as *Zend-Avesta*, or *Concerning the Things of Heaven and the Hereafter from the Standpoint of the Observation of Nature* and *The Day View Opposed to the Night View* would undoubtedly contribute revealing insights into Mahler’s vision of life after death. Furthermore, the understanding of Mahler through Fechner’s writings need not stop with the Second Symphony. While extensive work has been done with the Third Symphony, other works by Mahler which address life after death, specifically the First, Fourth, Eighth and Ninth Symphonies, in addition to *Das Lied von der Erde*, have yet to be assessed in relation to Fechner.

The importance of these connections should not be overlooked, for these ideas remained with Mahler until his death. Alma recollects:

> He read works of philosophy all through his illness and up to the very end. The last book he read was *The Problem of Life* by Eduard von Hartmann. By the end it was in fragments. He tore the pages from the binding, because he didn’t have the strength to hold more than a few pages at a time.\(^{299}\)

Hartmann followed in Fechner’s footsteps, hoping to reconcile science and religion, and using his philosophical forebear to support his own beliefs.\(^{300}\) Both Hartmann and Fechner sought to explain the divine force, or as Hartmann labels it, the *Lebensprinzip* (the life principle). That this philosophy was ultimately the last text Mahler read is of lasting significance.

Without question these concepts provided Mahler with comfort and contributed to his unfaltering belief in a continuing existence after death. To conclude this thesis with Mahler’s personal convictions on this topic seems only fitting. The following is a recollection by Richard

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\(^{300}\) Ibid., 1697.
Specht from 1908, describing a vehement eschatological declaration by Mahler, one verbalizing the conceptual result of his ideological heterogeneity:

Nevertheless, Mahler was a complete pantheist and a wholehearted believer in the doctrine of eternal reincarnation. I discovered that — and at the same time the violent passion with which he could react — when I sat at his table for the first time. I don’t know what led up to it and what event in a far-off future we were talking about, but I found myself making the following stupidly superficial and frivolous remark: “That does not interest me, for by then I shall have long ago disappeared; and when I reappear I shall not know anything about my earlier life.” There was a loud resounding crash which startled everybody and made the glasses jump and jangle! “How can a man like you make such a thoughtless remark! We all come back again, the whole of life only makes sense through this certainty, and it doesn’t matter in the slightest whether in a later stage of reincarnation we remember our earlier one. What matters is not the individual and his memories and pleasures, but only the great upward sweep to perfection, to the purification which progresses with every incarnation. That’s why I must live ethically, in order already now to spare my Self, when it comes again, part of the road it must travel, and to make its existence easier. That is my ethical duty, never mind whether my later Self knows about it or not, and whether it will thank me or not.”

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BIBLIOGRAPHY


